

**Contributory conditions to community
sustainability: Cornwall's Look Group Network**

Volume 1 of 1

Submitted by Fiona Catherine Wotton to the
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Contributory conditions to community sustainability: Cornwall's Look Group Network

Abstract

This thesis aims to contribute new understandings of community sustainability through a detailed case study of public sector and community relations within Cornwall. The Look Group Network is a multi-layered public sector and community adult informal learning partnership project which sought to connect Tate St Ives, a national art gallery operating in the far west of the UK, with new audiences. The case study situates together informal learning, community and sustainability and explores their interdependence. The study comprised participant observation with the Look Group members, semi-structured partner interviews, contextual research including a review of the social and political theory of community and an evaluation of relevant sustainable community and informal learning policy. The research aims to identify the underlying conditions which contributed to the sustainability of the Look Groups over a four year period and to assess to what extent these conditions could be transferred to other communities. The original contribution of this project to the existing research literature is in the application of Complexity Theory to empirical data to enable an understanding of the systemic dynamics that contribute to sustainability and in the development of method in the consideration of community and group dynamics.

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In loving memory of Christopher Eric Hallinan Jackson.

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Introduction

The context for my research is political debates about what conditions contribute to the sustainability of communities. The research is based on a four year study of a network of community learning groups – the Look Group Network – a grant funded partnership between a national art gallery, a local authority and community participants and employs a Participant Observation methodology including focus groups and interviews with participants and public sector partners, observations and immersion in the activity alongside policy and documentary analysis. This thesis aims to provide a novel approach to the examination of the sustainable community by positioning the study in an unusual context and through the use of Complexity Theory in understanding community sustainability as the emergent behaviours of a Complex Adaptive System. The research aim is met by three research questions:

- 1) What are the conditions which support the sustainability of the Look groups?
- 2) How does the research contribute to the micro understanding of community sustainability?
- 3) To what extent does Complexity Theory provide a means for developing a theoretical understanding of sustainable community dynamics and of the dynamics of successfully transferring these conditions to other communities?

A significant contribution of the thesis is the development of method in consideration of group and community dynamics through the development and application of the Ebb and Flow cycle. Sustainability, this account will argue is

a dynamic property of collective entities. The case study documents, through both theory and empirical data, the nested qualities of social groupings, dynamic dyads are nested within dynamic groups, who are nested within dynamic communities and so on. These different layers of communicative groupings are continually interacting with one another and with their environments creating potential conditions for survival. The focus of this project has been on trying to make sense of all these dynamic relationships. Complexity Theory offered a unified conceptual and theoretical framework for making sense of all of these dynamic conditions. The Ebb & Flow cycle is a model or representation of how the general principles of Complexity have been adapted and applied to the specific case of the dynamics of the Look Groups, from the perspective of their sustainability.

From the outset I knew that by exploring the idea of the sustainable community I was dealing with a contested term. This was a concept which brought together multiple and often conflicting ideas and Government attempts to push forward the ideal as a policy objective had generated piecemeal results. The British public's earliest encounter with the concept of the sustainable community was through the publication of the Sustainable Communities Plan (2003). Although the plan made reference to a host of soft social targets such as quality of life, well-being and safety, it was essentially a spatial strategy which placed existing regeneration plans for key zones, in particular the plan aimed to tackle the shortage of affordable housing in the South East, into a wider environmental sustainability context. Viewed alongside other geographically defined notions of community such as the Neighbourhood Renewal programme, the sustainable community, it appeared to me, was a set of ideals for housing developers to

incorporate into the design and fabrication of large-scale new build schemes. How this interpretation of community or sustainability could be of use to established communities - particularly those in rural areas for whom the likelihood of a large scale development designing away community decline or being sensitive to the rich tapestry of relationships and connections so as to promote new conditions for sustainability - appeared remote. The focus on the physical building of communities overlooked social dynamics through which communities evolve and grow.

It is an enormous challenge for the wide range of individuals who need to engage in practical actions to improve and sustain their communities to conceive of the multitude of different influences which could affect community sustainability. Simplified models such as sustainability being presented as resting on the three pillars – environment, society and economy - assist in the conception of the whole problem but have the negative effect of magnetising groups towards one pillar at the expense of their understanding of the other two and everything which might fall between the pillars. Despite misgivings about the way in which the term had been used politically in the UK, it was still a concept which I believed was worth pursuing and with a sense of urgency. The importance of the community as a unit of democracy and of action was in tackling the collective needs to secure and sustain resources like energy and food in the light of environmental change. But my problem with this position was in understanding how you can organise a community energy scheme or get enough people together to lodge a complaint against a developer if you don't know anyone? If you spend all day at work and your neighbours have already put the children to bed and locked up for the night before you are home, how

will you meet them? If you have just moved to the area and everyone has already formed their own social groups, how will you find friends to support you and help you enjoy living there? If you can't speak to people and get to know them and understand their hopes and dreams and fears how can you convince them that a wind turbine on their field would be a good idea?

The Big Society, which appears to have superseded the concept of the sustainable community in contemporary UK policy since 2010, surfaced as a discussion point in my focus groups with the Look Group members and interviews with partners; so too did the ideas of retreat, migration and isolation. Another interesting pattern in the results was the absence of any strong association between community sustainability and the natural environment. The Look Group Network was founded by Tate St Ives, a modern and contemporary art gallery in the far west of Cornwall which is part of the Tate family of galleries which cares for a national collection of British and international art. The project was a partnership with the local authority, Cornwall Council and funded by the Learning Transformation Fund, a national funding programme to support adult informal learning. I played a professional role in the inception of the project by developing this funding bid and so bring a level of "insider information" to the exploration of context. The aim of the Look Group project was to extend the reach of the gallery into dispersed communities across Cornwall by creating groups of self-directed learners who managed their own learning on an art theme. This project, which built an in-depth research relationship with five Look Groups found several agreed themes of sustainable, resilient communities which spoke of the need to recognise migration as both a challenge and opportunity for communities in Cornwall. At least one Look

Group member in every group reported specifically on issues related to their moving into a community in the region. As a result of this migration members feel isolated. The Look Groups expressed appreciation for the resources Tate or Cornwall Council had provided to facilitate their learning activity but also reported resistance to feeling controlled and closely related these feelings with their interpretations of community and sustainability. From a political perspective this provided rich material to consider the distribution of power within communities and how this relates to sustainability.

When attending conferences or talking to colleagues I was frequently asked why I had not selected an example of informal learning or volunteering which was more closely related to the principles of sustainability – coppicing, growing vegetables, bicycle maintenance were all suggested as skills which communities could learn which would have a beneficial environmental impact. One conference delegate from the Transitions Town movement in Totnes thought there was “no point at all” in linking cultural learning with the idea of a sustainable community and urged me to re-think the tenuous connection I was making between the case study and the idea of the sustainable community. My defence was (and remains) that firstly there was already a strong body of academic research on informal sustainability learning and much useful and easily accessible reflection by communities sharing such skills and knowledge through social media and blogging. Conducting research with groups of learners who were already identifying community environmental needs and taking action would be preaching to the converted. The second line of argument I put forward was that in considering sustainability as the product of a delicate balance of environmental, social and economic conditions, informal learning has

an obvious social aspect which was ripe for investigation. The selected case study - a publicly funded activity being conducted in a time of austerity by a quasi governmental organisation and a local authority - presented clear economic interpretations of sustainability. The lack of an obvious link between the informal learning taking place within the Look Group Network and its potential benefit to the physical environment provided me with access to a sample of individuals who were not engaged directly in environmental sustainability activity. The case study thus provided a means to address a gap in the sustainable community research literature through an exploration of different collective ideas of community and sustainability and to uncover where connections could be made between the Look Group's understanding of these terms and the broader sustainability discourses.

Another external reaction to my research topic from fellow researchers was the sense that the research participants were not needy enough. Alongside presentations of well-digging in Africa, the removal of shanty towns in Rio de Janeiro and domestic violence and drug abuse in Glasgow, I could understand that my work with the Look Groups might have appeared rather pedestrian. Even using soft indicators of poverty or need used within rural areas such as access to vehicles, the Look Groups were well resourced and showed little outward evidence of need. In the introduction to Appendix 3, I include an extract from my research journal in which I admit my disappointment that my first meeting with the Look Group Network had a sense of déjà vu with members of the groups seeming to be very similar to the Tate audiences I was already familiar with. I was quick to dispel these feelings through a recognition of the unique context the project was taking place in, which precipitated new

understandings of poverty, including cultural poverty. I also recognised in these early encounters with Look Group members a high degree of articulacy and engagement with the workings of the project which would not only generate rich explanations of the connections and relationships present in the project but allow comparisons to be made with the data collected from the project partners. This in turn, I hypothesised, would allow an understanding of the underlying processes in a multi-level public sector-community partnership project which could then be applied to alternative contexts. Mirroring the dynamics of a complex adaptive system, my selection of research case study optimised my local micro connections to influence global macro concerns.

The application of Complexity Theory as a theoretical framework offered a number of advantages in exploring community sustainability. A Complexity approach, as Chapter 2 will explore, conceives a community as a complex adaptive system. Sustainability is synonymous with survival, an emergent property which is achieved through self-organisation within the system and adaptation to changes in the environment. Even the very simplest models of sustainability point to the idea of interdependence which in turn generates different combinations and complexities which advance confusion over causation. In this research proposition with multiple partners operating in parallel environments and different conceptualisations of sustainability (eg the economic viability of the project contrasted with the survival of remote rural communities) the benefit of a Complexity approach is in accessing a range of concepts to enhance understanding of sustainability and a means (a framework) to relate these different and interdependent structures and behaviours together. The importance of analysing both micro and macro level

interactions within this Complexity study has shown the sustainability of the project to be a process of co-evolution which exhibits a strong association with the participants understanding of broader notions of community sustainability.

As well as the careful selection of an appropriate analytical framework, another methodological concern was my position in relation to the research subject. Giving birth to twins at the end of my first year of the PhD presented numerous challenges to my completion goal but also provided some significant opportunities for the research process. My year of maternity leave and the decelerated pace of working part-time gave the opportunity to observe and follow the developments of the Look Group over a longer period. I was also able to spend more time in my own local community observing and participating in the dynamics of institutions like the baby groups and local libraries and how the political and economic environment of austerity were both constraining and helping to grow different forms of civil society. My daughters have also been a great source of learning about the micro connections and developments which contribute to their individual growth and to the society they are part of. At each stage of development from feeding to walking and beyond the parent is encouraging autonomy but with each move towards independence comes a new set of rules to guide individual safety and social acceptance. Parents must choose – though I believe few would call it a choice – to what degree they allow external influence from different government agencies to guide their actions. As a consequence of the choices we can now enjoy in a developed economy, the range of issues which government departments offer advice to parents on has grown exponentially. From breastfeeding to vaccinations, road safety to formal

pre-schooling it is hard to avoid some form of attempted state intervention in parenting behaviour. My own questioning and resistance to some of these forms of control was echoed by the experiences I recorded from the community perspective.

Throughout the thesis I have allowed self-reflexivity to play a role in the analysis of the context and the results from the study as a means to position myself in relation to the themes which arose and their significance. Drawing on my personal and professional experiences has enabled me to answer not only the question “what was the data telling me?” but also “what was the data telling me that they might not tell someone else?”¹ This allows a critical reflection on my own role as observer and interpreter which from a Complexity perspective is an essential part of defining the system under scrutiny.

Thesis outline

The body of the thesis is structured into three parts: context, findings and analysis. Part 1 is an exploration of the context for the research. Beginning with the theoretical context and moving next to the political context and then to methodological concerns, the section will introduce key definitions and situate the research within existing bodies of literature and policy.

Chapter 1 considers theories of community and their relationship with the notion of the sustainable community. Historical analysis reveals how theories of community have evolved in response to a more diverse, political, technology driven and dispersed global society. A detailed appraisal of social capital

¹ Shrivastava, P. & Hopwood, N. (2009) p81

theory's usefulness in considering the dynamics of the sustainable community provides a means to introduce Complexity Theory.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of Complexity Theory and the distinctive features of Complex Adaptive Systems. It proceeds into a more detailed exploration of complexity theory within the social sciences and makes the case for framing the sustainable community as a Complex Adaptive System.

Chapter 3 explores the political context for the research through an examination of UK sustainability policies and attempts to define a sustainable community within the sphere of public policy. Demonstrating the range of possible external influences on a community, the chapter maps out the relationship between different policy fields and interests and their intersection with the idea of sustainability. These diverse fields include adult informal learning policy and regional sustainable community strategy.

Chapter 4 presents and justifies the methods used in the design, data collection and results analysis of this research project. Participant Observation, as the overarching research methodology, is explored alongside other concerns including the research audience and legacy. The Ebb and Flow cycle is introduced as an analytic tool in the understanding of community dynamics.

Part 2 presents the findings from the participant observations and interviews with Council Council and Tate staff and the members of the Look Groups.

Chapter 5 presents a qualitative analysis of the cross-cutting themes which surfaced within the data across all three perspectives: project, political and community. Five overlapping themes are discussed: authority, control and

purpose; resources; isolation and insularity, joining in, resources, sameness and difference which respond to Research Question 1.

Chapter 6 selects themes from the qualitative analysis for a renewed dissection using a Complexity Theory framework to understand the relationship dynamics from a systems perspective. This analysis includes the observation of self organisation within the Look Group system and emergent behaviours such as co-operation, sustainability and community. The material evaluated responds directly to the areas of inquiry for Research Questions 2 and 3.

Chapter 7 – the discussion chapter presents the answers to the three key research questions and appraises the validity of the findings.

The thesis concludes with **Chapter 8** which argues the main contributions of the study and the implications of the results, highlights further areas of inquiry and makes practical recommendations to the research participants.

Chapter 1 – Theories of Community

Chapter Introduction

Community is a term scholars have been debating and attempting to define for centuries. From anthropological accounts of communities identified by shared culture to political discourses on citizen participation in civil society, community remains a richly seductive challenge for researchers providing so many contrasting and multi-dimensional views that the concept is in danger of becoming meaningless. As Chapter 2 explored, governmental interpretation of community, often as geographical areas of identified disadvantage requiring investment and regeneration, took a new turn at the beginning of the 21st century with the adoption of the “sustainable community” as a focus for policy development and for structural reform. Having explored the sustainable community through national and global policy, in this chapter I will seek out a definition of community in the academic literature and in particular explore how social capital and complexity theory might potentially contribute to the ambitious ideal inherent in the concept of the sustainable community. I will argue that whilst place-based interpretations of community are still valid, a twenty first century definition must take into account the reality of contemporary social relations.

A major preoccupation for all the major political thinkers from classical times to the present day is the enduring tension between community, society and state. Historically community and society were interchangeable ideas which

expressed social relationships beyond the family². Through the growth of the modern state and its encroachment upon society, community became associated with nostalgic ideas of tradition, with belonging, co-operation and shared values which form an alternative to society. Historical perspectives under analysis including Aristotle, Hobbes and Locke will shed light on the defining of community through a resistance to the state. My rationale for using these texts is to explore some of the themes which surfaced in the policy review including the idea of government using community as a tool to achieve social, economic and environmental sustainability and the negotiation of normative community behaviours and properties. The choice of material – in particular the idea of the social contract creating a form of political community – also responds to similar themes which will be reported from the empirical data. The Look Groups expressed a range of views about how the state should intervene at a community level and how they embraced or resisted Tate's involvement. Whether or not they welcomed the label of "community" in relation to the Look Group activity, the processes of interaction they described revealed the network following a set of social rules which bring mutual benefits and obligations to both the groups and to Tate.

Delanty points to three 'upheavals' which inspired the major discourses on community: the American and French revolutions, industrialisation and globalisation³. For Rousseau, Tönnies, Burke and Marx these three transformative processes, which continue to influence society and state, mark a turning point at which traditional community values and associations begin their

² Delanty, G. (2010) p2

³ Ibid p x

decline. In their place, modernity spawned new structures and practices that today are regularly held up as the causes of social injustice, environmental degradation and over-consumption which the sustainable community seeks to challenge and prevent. Accounts of community by these theorists help to define the utopias that have been lost and which may hold clues to the contemporary construction of the sustainable community. The empirical data also surfaced a theme of individuals migrating or returning to Cornwall to seek out community which they felt was missing or had been lost in their home towns or cities. Community is elusive when populations are dispersed, the participants told me. They also reported how temporary and transient they can be with institutions, associations, ideologies and taste creating different types of community of place and interest that compete for members.

The empirical data also pointed to the darker side of community which I respond to with a review of 20th century literature including Nisbet's total community and Cohen's community boundary. The emphasis, from the respondents, on the importance of communication as a means to unite communities and convey difference was another strong theme which mirrored my own assumptions for the foundations for community. My review of Habermas's theory of communicative action and the public sphere is closely linked with an examination of the role of the artist in society which in turn responds to the rarefying of the artist within the Look Groups.

The most substantial body of literature reviewed is linked to a contemporary approach to community dynamics which has been celebrated for its powers to unite and strengthen communities: social capital. This account will argue that

social capital can be a useful metaphor but that as a theory, is not fully tested at the level of community to be satisfactory in the exploration of sustainable communities. The roots of the approach in rational choice theory also present difficulties in trying to account for collective behaviours.

The final section explores the paradigm literature of complexity theory to provide a case for its application in analysing sustainable community behaviour and introduce the detailed review of complexity literature in Chapter 4.

Section 1: Community, Society and State

The Ancient Greeks saw no distinction between society and community with community being defined by citizen participation in the public realm or *polis*. For Aristotle “every state is a community of some kind...the state or political community which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other and at the highest good”⁴. He goes on to clarify the social make-up of a community “the state is a partnership and a partnership of citizens in a constitution”⁵. Post-Enlightenment discourses, however, commonly present community in opposition to society. This argument requires a view of society as organised by the state: a distant governing body with little relevance to most people’s daily lives⁶. In contrast community is the directly experienced social interactions. The roots of this opposition lie in early modern political theories in which philosophers of the time increasingly recognised the need for citizens to hold their rulers accountable. Hobbes’ *Leviathan* provides the origins of modern individualism with his assertion that in

⁴ Aristotle (Trans 1885) Book 1.1

⁵ Ibid Book 3.1

⁶ Delanty 2010 p2

a society without government, the right of nature prevails which is “the liberty each man hath to use his own power as he will himself for the preservation of his own nature” ⁷. In contrast, however, he argues for accountable and absolute government and a strong civil society to prevent the inevitable conflict between citizens engaged in “a war of all against all”. Hobbes’ civil society or political community is constructed by all men waiving their individual right of nature in order to “be contented with so much liberty against other men as he would allow other men against himself.”⁸

John Locke also presented the idea of a contract between the state and its citizens but had a less violent view of the state of nature and the reason for the formation of communities and society. Man in his natural state has “perfect freedom”⁹ and is taught by reason to refrain from harming his fellow man. Locke’s state of nature implies a set of rules which “men are morally obliged to obey when they have not contracted or promised to modify their behaviour in any way”¹⁰. So what then encourages man to group together and form community?

*Men being, as has been said, by nature all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this estate and subjected to the political power of another without his own consent, which is done by agreeing with other men, to join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living, one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties, and a greater security against any that are not of it.*¹¹

⁷ Hobbes (1651) p 89

⁸ Ibid p.90

⁹ Locke, J. (1823) §1 p105

¹⁰ Hampsher-Monk, I. (1992) p 84

¹¹ Locke, J. (1823) §8 p146

The key word in the above extract as revealed in subsequent sections of the Second Treatise, is “properties”. By property Locke means more than physical possessions. The contemporary use of the term in his lifetime was broader and referred to fundamental human rights¹². So Locke saw men coming together to protect their “lives, liberties and estates”¹³ from the uncertainty of the state of nature where invasion, revenge, controversy or negligence are a constant threat. The contract which citizens enter into with government is to guarantee natural rights through systems of law and justice.

As previously stated, at the time that Hobbes and Locke were writing, Aristotle’s understanding of community and society being interchangeable was the established view with the distinction between community and civil society really only emerging as part of the new discipline of sociology led by theorists such as Tönnies and Durkheim in the late nineteenth century¹⁴. Hobbes and Locke’s idea of a contract between citizens still has resonance with contemporary ideas of society and in particular to the sustainable community where residents, institutions and businesses are all asked to make compromises in their individual behaviour, such as reducing energy use, in order to benefit the wider community and future generations but with the expectation that the state – at either local or national level – will act as arbiter in the process ensuring the allocation of resources are fair. The social contract is evident in contemporary political thinking such as David Miliband’s call, as Environment Secretary, for an environmental contract which would “have the same effect on our institutions,

¹² Hampsher Monk, I. (1992) p88

¹³ Locke (1823) 9§ p159

¹⁴ Gilchrist, A. (2004) p 2

norms and values as the social contract developed in the last century”¹⁵. In 2011, the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) also drew on the idea in their report *World in Transition: A Social Contract for Sustainability* which described a social contract as consolidating:

*a culture of attentiveness (born of a sense of ecological responsibility), a culture of participation (as a democratic responsibility) and a culture of obligation towards future generations (future responsibility)*¹⁶.

O'Brien et al warn against the idea of “tweaking” enlightenment thinking to create contemporary social contracts. Arguing that “(a)ny type of new social contract is likely to include what could be called a larger conceptualization of ‘we’”¹⁷ they claim that the idea of a unilateral contract between state and community is not possible when faced with the global and complex issue of climate change.

Underlying these different accounts is the theme that community is constructed with a particular end in mind. For Aristotle it was to achieve happiness, for Hobbes safety, for Locke security of property and rights. They also present a view of community of individuals either sharing the same ideas or putting their differences to one side for the greater good – a community of interest. This provides a contrast with the policy material reviewed in Chapter 2 in which communities of place are more prominent.

¹⁵ Miliband, D. (2006) Audit Commission Annual Lecture and Debate Speech Wednesday 19 July 2006 available at: <http://archive.audit-commission.gov.uk/auditcommission/sitecollectiondocuments/Downloads/20060719annuallecture.pdf> last accessed 01/08/14

¹⁶ WBGU (2011) *World in Transition: A Social Contract for Social Sustainability* Summary for Policy Makers available at: http://www.wbgu.de/fileadmin/templates/dateien/veroeffentlichungen/hauptgutachten/jg2011/wbgu_jg2011_kurz_en.pdf last accessed 01/08/14

¹⁷ O'Brien, K., B. Hayward, and F. Berkes. 2009. “Rethinking social contracts: building resilience in a changing climate.” *Ecology and Society* 14(2): 12. [online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol14/iss2/art12/>

Section 2: Loss of community

From the nineteenth century onwards community discourses begin to be dominated by the idea of community as being lost, recoverable or a yet to be achieved utopian ideal. Primitive rural communities in particular are highlighted as being the very essence of community where strong social and familial ties provide a backbone of health and well-being. Rousseau traced man's evolution from the state of nature, marvelling at how few cares early humans must have had as a result of their pre-societal existence and describing the bonds of these early communities:

*Having previously wandered amongst the forests and having assumed a more fixed situation, men slowly came together and united into different bands, eventually forming in each country a particular nation, united by mores and characteristic features, not by regulations and laws, but by the same kind of life and foods and by the common influence of the climate*¹⁸

He goes on to chart the rise of society with the development of its obligations, laws, social contracts, wealth and cultures creating inequalities between individuals and families.

For Tönnies, community begins to dissolve with the dismantling of the medieval institutions of the town guilds and the commercialisation of agriculture which heralded the advent of modernity. His 1887 work *Community and Civil Society*¹⁹ also finds the conditions for genuine community in 'gemeinschaft' an "original or natural state [where] there is complete unity of human wills"²⁰ built around the family unit. In contrast 'gesellschaft' (civil society) is built around the city and rational will. The decline of the community, he argued, was due to the growth of mass society in which every man seeks his own advantage and social relations become reduced to commercial transactions in the market place (p 64-

¹⁸ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1755) p48-9

¹⁹ In some translations *Community and Society*

²⁰ Tönnies, F. (1827) p 22

5). Tönnies has been compared to Edmund Burke²¹ for their shared romantic view of the family as a building block of society and public life. Burke believed that:

*(w)e begin our public affection in our families. No cold relation is a zealous citizen. We pass on to our neighbourhoods and our habitual provincial connections. These are inns and resting places. Such divisions of our country as have been formed by habit.*²²

It is these reflections on the French revolution and romantic, yet paternalistic views of society which modern Conservatism is founded on and in particular the Big Society referenced in Chapter 2. In fact, Tönnies was a committed socialist, believing that “socialism was as natural to society as individualism”²³ and the ideals he shared with Burke may be more psychological than political or economic.

Community discourses from the nineteenth century do provide some hope to those lamenting the rise in individualism and its impact on community values. Rather than being something to be recovered from the past, communist and socialist discourses offered new utopian ideals of community. Like Rousseau and Tönnies, Karl Marx saw the rise of society and capitalism as destructive to community and called for a collective uprising from the population as a means to create a classless, stateless society. Community in the communist sense was formed not in abstract shared identities or cultures built around institutions which perpetuated inequality like the Church or feudalism, but through revolution resulting in shared ownership of the means of production and subsistence. This vision of self-sufficiency has much in common with the goals

²¹ Kirkpatrick 1986 p73

²² Burke 1790 in 5:352

²³ Delanty 2010 p22

of the contemporary sustainable development movement. Of particular interest for this account, however, is Marx's rejection of the liberal idea of society being composed of many individuals who exist "prior to and independent of any social relations"²⁴ and basing their economic activity on their individual needs. For Marx, individuals were defined by their social relations, whether this be basic units of community like the family or their expansion into clans, so that when it came to considering the economy and production, "what is meant is always (. . .) production by social individuals"²⁵. As the later section, which explores social capital will argue, a reductionist view of community with individual rational action accounting for collective behaviour is an unsatisfactory way to explain the foundations for sustainability.

Section 3: Communities of difference

Writers from the 20th century onwards recognised a darker, more troubling side to state intervention into the realm of community. This period in history saw the rise of extreme forms of nationalism and fascism in Europe. Robert Nisbet used the term 'total community' to describe the emergence of totalitarian ideologies spawning communities formed from a fusion of state and society²⁶. The idea of community began to express national identity constructed around extreme right wing ideas. The Hitler Youth movement built up a community of young men with shared interests in the outdoors, camping, shooting and other sports whilst indoctrinating them in extreme political ideologies that would justify the supremacy of the Aryan race and the exclusion and oppression of other groups. "Fascism was the ultimate expression of ...symbolic and sacred community,

²⁴ Sayer (2007) p 2

²⁵ Marx, K. (1973 p 85

²⁶ Nisbet, R.(1967) p 189

which provided a legitimization of authoritarian politics based on elites, racism and the anesthetization of politics”²⁷.

These examples of communities created to fulfil political purposes, should serve as a warning to the authors of sustainable community strategies and policies. Clearly the ideologies and political tactics of Nazi Germany bear little resemblance to policies designed to motivated communities to adopt sustainable behaviour. The warning relates to the level of intervention by government in creating communities by location and identity. Drawing community boundaries for the purposes of localised government is fraught with difficulty and in the instance of the Sustainable Community can result in situations where residents are encouraged to participate in decision making and identity building within a local sphere that may be meaningless to them and based purely on what will suit the local authority best. More dangerous is the creation of an artificial community identity. In trying to engender a sense of belonging within a neighbourhood, authorities run the risk of excluding others – future residents, their children and other users as referred to in the above definition. The stronger the community’s boundaries, the more impenetrable it becomes to others - not ideal in a constantly changing, diverse society. The community is thus isolated as it closes itself off to innovation and change - both key elements of a sustainable community. Cohen, an anthropologist and advocate of symbolism as the foundation for community, describes the use that communities can make from boundaries of difference:

²⁷ Delanty, G. (2000) p.22

Since boundaries are inherently oppositional, almost any matter of perceived difference between a community and the outside world can be rendered symbolically as a resource of its boundary. Members of a community can make virtually anything grist to the symbolic mill of cultural difference, whether it be the effects upon it of some centrally formulated government policy, or matters of dialect, dress, drinking or dying. The symbolic nature of the opposition means that people can 'think themselves into difference'.

Cohen (1985:118)

Themes of communities formed in difference or in isolation to others surfaced in different ways throughout the participant discussions and interviews. There were respondents who were proud of their Cornish identity but who felt isolated in communities of migrants. But those who had recently relocated to Cornwall felt excluded by their lack of knowledge of traditions and informal rules because they were not part of the right conversations. Finding this knowledge was a discursive process, they reported, which forms a link to the following section on community as communication.

Section 4: Community as Communication

My own assumptions about community, revealed in the introductory chapter, were that collective action to achieve sustainability goals such as limiting energy consumption requires strong social relations and groups being in dialogue with one another. This account of theories of community required a review of material which placed communication as the social ties through which communities are formed and sustained and I have selected Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (1984, 1987) as a starting point to explore this aspect of community conceptualisation. Habermas's earlier work recognised the importance of the informal learning institutions which I explore in Chapter 3

which emerged in eighteenth century Europe in forming a public sphere distinct from the state and the increasingly governed society²⁸. The coffee shops, reading groups and journals through which political and cultural learning spread, created new critical communities based on dialogue which challenged the norms and values of authority and the representation of culture and identity²⁹. From this view of dialogue as a foundation of communities of resistance³⁰, Habermas developed a theory of communicative action in which communication is the basis of all social action:

...what binds sociated individuals to one another and secures the integration of society is a web of communicative actions that thrives only in the light of cultural traditions and not systemic mechanisms that are out of the reach of a member's intuitive knowledge.³¹

These common cultural traditions referred to above are the environment in which communicative communities form and operate and explain how they maintain their distinction from the rest of society. The theory of communicative action asserts that language exists to form consensus and co-operation. Language and society have a reflexive relationship: social action is linguistically mediated and language develops in response to social needs. This “original’ mode of language use”³² is, however, in tension with a strategic use of language to assert authority and obedience. Strategic action, motivated by power and money, undermines and limits the effects of communicative action. Habermas places importance on the role of civil society in communicating the norms and values of communities to “preserve them from falling prey to the systemic imperatives of economic and administrative subsystems growing with

²⁸ Ingram, D. (2010) p153

²⁹ <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/art-and-visual-culture-medieval-modern/content-section-2.3.3>

³⁰ Delanty, G (2010) p87

³¹ Habermas, U. (1987) p148-9

³² Warnke, G. (2006) p121

dynamics of their own.”³³ He cannot, however, agree with the communitarian perspective, discussed later, which advocates for social autonomy at the level of civil society:

*Forms of self-organization strengthen the collective capacity for action. Grassroots organizations, however, may not cross the threshold to the formal organization of independent systems. Otherwise they will pay for the indisputable gain in complexity by having organizational goals detached from the orientations and attitudes of their members and dependent instead upon imperatives of maintaining and expanding organizational power.*³⁴

Self-organisation is a major theme of the complexity analysis in Chapter 10 where my argument rests on the assumption that organisations like the Look Groups are nested rather than independent systems whose behaviour will necessarily follow the patterns of other systems within their environment to maintain stability – as Habermas suggests. But rather than a hierarchical, linear relationship, the microscopic relationships between members of the groups can create macroscopic and unexpected outcomes. Thus the local can begin to influence the global.

Habermas’ description of the public sphere and the shift away from media which represented the power of the monarchy or the state through critical dialogue is closely associated with the literature on the role of art and artists in society which I now consider to provide a context for the findings from the Look Groups.

³³ Habermas, U. (1987) p 373

³⁴ Habermas, U. (1985) p 364 quoted in Elliott, B. (2009) p 896

Section 5: The artist in society

*Artists are part of a large web of meaning in which they are just the most obvious but least important actors. Artists are simply the scribes of struggles over meaning and representation within various groups in society.*³⁵

Throughout the results, there was a widespread suggestion that the artists in the group played a distinct role in the learning community. With the case study involving a national arts organisation and a programme of visual art learning, this invited my questioning of what broader theory or discourse might exist which examined the role of the artist in society and which could be of relevance to this research project.

Gaztambide-Fernández's three conceptions of the artist's role in society: cultural civiliser, border crosser and representator are presented here together with the pedagogical function of the artist which also surfaces in the literature (Becker, C. (2000); Kushin, J. (2006)). These conceptions are all derived from a perspective which challenges a traditional view that "being an artist is simply a matter of inspiration, talent, or intrinsic skill and that the role of the artist is merely to produce 'great' works of art that are valuable for their own sake"³⁶. This shift in the sociology of art which came about with the publication of Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* (1984) and Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984)³⁷ places the artist as part of an interacting network and art production as a collective process.

³⁵ Gaztambide-Fernandez, R. (2008) p249

³⁶ Ibid p 238

³⁷ De la Fuente, E. (2007): p 410

5.1: The Artist as Cultural Civiliser

The artist role of cultural civiliser derives from the cultural discourse of liberal humanism. The artist becomes part of modernity's plan of improvement by contributing their special talents to create aesthetically pleasing works. The origins of this role for the artist can be traced through the Renaissance period when artists began to differentiate themselves from craftsmen and artisans. Artists were able to elevate their social position by creating artefacts of beauty which helped their patrons to demonstrate their civility. With the Enlightenment period advancing this view of culture as the mark of civilisation, new institutions such as museums, galleries, orchestras, art academies and cultural societies were established to "fulfil the role of arbitrating and passing judgement about which works of art were worthy of conservation and how to preserve them"³⁸. In Britain, the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), founded in a coffee shop in Covent Garden in 1754³⁹, is one surviving example from this original flourishing of institutions which paved the way for the foundation of a national art collection from whence the first Tate gallery was developed. This perspective of the artist is dependent on the notion of art for art's sake. It is closely associated with Kant's aesthetic judgement and the idea of the artist as genius which was so pervasive throughout the 18th and 19th centuries that it "came to resemble a quasi-religious ecstasy in which the art-lover's soul gained access to a higher realm"⁴⁰. This romanticist view that an artist lives to create works of universal and absolute beauty persists in popular contemporary discourse as the

³⁸ G-Fernandez (2008) p 242

³⁹ <http://www.thersa.org/about-us/history-and-archive> last accessed 24/04/14

⁴⁰ Carey, J. (2006) p 12

caricature of the penniless artist “selflessly devoted” to his/her work⁴¹ and in debates about the aesthetics of contemporary art works in public museums.

Gaztambide-Fernández, uses the theories of Becker and DiMaggio to argue that this humanist idea of art for art’s sake is at variance with “the clearly social character of the institutions that select and protect great works of art”⁴². Social institutions – whether they are formal organisations, interests or conventions - determine artistic production, distribution and education. Becker states that “(t)he artist’s involvement with and dependence on cooperative links (...) constrains the kind of art he can produce.”⁴³ This limits the role which the artist alone through divine inspiration or individual talent can perform in advancing civilising culture. It points instead to the artist’s connectedness with the public sphere and how a social role is implicit in their work.

5.2: The Artist as border crosser

The conception of the artist as a border crosser draws on critical theory to challenge concepts like “genius” as being redolent of oppressive power relations. The artist crosses literal and symbolic borders in order to destabilize dominant structures “towards a total reconstruction of society”⁴⁴. Race and gender in particular are highlighted as social categories which the artist can challenge and disturb through their work. For Carol Becker, the conception of the artist as a border crosser is related to Edward Said’s *public intellectual* which in turn derives from Gramsci’s *organic intellectual*. Said defined a public intellectual as “someone whose place is to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted

⁴¹ Abbing, H. (2002) p 80

⁴² G-Fernandez, R. (2008) p 243

⁴³ Becker, H. S. (1984) p 26

⁴⁴ G-Fernandez, R. (2008) p 245

by governments or corporations"⁴⁵. Carol Becker simplifies her definition of a public intellectual to someone who "believe(s) in the importance of the public sphere". It is artists interacting with different discourses, disciplines and ideas "to further their goal of answering the questions they have posed for themselves or calling attention to concerns they feel should be addressed by the society"⁴⁶ which confirms their role as a group on the margins of communities.

Much of Carol Becker's more recent work focuses on the artist crossing the border between private and public spheres and how the blurring of public and private forms of government and the growth of social and broadcast media have led public intellectuals including artists to protect public places as arenas for protest (2012, 2014). Gaztambide-Fernandez expresses these notions of public spaces as "the imagined institution to which artists as border crossers are accountable and to which they are expected to contribute"⁴⁷ and points to the challenge that in imagining public spaces, the artist becomes isolated from the rest of society and their challenges irrelevant.

5.3: The Artist as Representator

The positioning of the artist as representator draws on the work of Barthes, Foucault and cultural populism discourses to describe the shift in attention from artist to audience in trying to understand the artist as a representator or cultural inscriber⁴⁸. The complex interplay between artist and audience in the production and consumption of art calls into question the distinctive artist identity.

⁴⁵ Becker, C. (1993) p 11

⁴⁶ Becker, C. (2014) online source

⁴⁷ Gaztambide-Fernandez, R. (2008) p 247

⁴⁸ Ibid p 249

*The sociology of art enables us to see that artistic practice is situated practice, the mediation of aesthetic codes...and ideological, social and material processes and institutions. At the same time it insists that we do not lose sight of the artist as the locus of this mediation and the facilitator of its expression.*⁴⁹

The material reviewed positions the artist in a pivotal societal location which bridges institutions and social groups. They inhabit spaces – real or imagined – between society and community, blurring the distinction between public and private. Their work is created by social interactions and they thus become associated with processes of both coalescing and dividing and these are processes of power and authority. Artistic autonomy leads to suspicion and rejection by both political elites and communities alike⁵⁰ whilst their work may represent or stimulate connections between groups with common political or cultural concerns. This inclusion of this review of material allows me to set the scene for ideas which surface in the findings about the artists' role in the groups and more generally regarding power and authority and their creation through different relationships. Chapter 5 will argue that the artists in the Look Groups are most explicitly performing the roles of representator and teacher but that the balance of artist to audience, teacher to student is crucial in creating the right conditions for the sustainability of the group. I return to the theme of the artist identity in both the findings and discussion chapters. I now turn to an area of social theory which has had significant use in sustainable community theorising and policy.

⁴⁹ Wolff, J. (1993) p 137 quoted in Gaztambide-Fernández, R. (2008) p238

⁵⁰ Rosler M. (1994) p 63

Section 6: Social Capital and the Sustainable Community

Many accounts of community use Social Capital to try to understand and explain why some communities have the ability to be strong and cohesive when others do not. These community attributes are closely associated with the idea of a sustainable community. This account will argue that social capital as a means of analysis is flawed on numerous levels and on its own is unsuitable for an evaluation of sustainability at a community level. Social capital studies raise awareness of and place a value on the kind of behaviours and relationships that help social cohesion and which might include volunteering, organising and/or taking part in group activities, voting and building personal networks. This account does not question the idea that these behaviours or relationships benefit the sustainability of a community but argues firstly that generalised conceptual and operational problems seriously undermine social capital as an analytical tool per se and secondly presents a number of specific problems with social capital which make it an insufficient means to explain or develop a sustainable community. A reframing of the component parts of social capital as the emergent properties of complex system dynamics, however, may assist in the understanding of how these beneficial collective behaviours arise.

6.1: What is social capital?

Part of the challenge in defining social capital is unpicking the different strands of ideology woven into the concept through the consciousness and vocabulary of both ends of the political spectrum. From its first appearance within Bourdieu's Marxist account of how the dominant class replicate and maintain influence through old school tie style networks, social capital - as filtered through Coleman's rational choice economic theory and Putnam's re-packaging

as a neo-Tocquevillian communitarian policy tool – social capital has undergone significant conceptual shifts.

Bourdieu's extension of the idea of capital to include social, cultural and symbolic capital attempted to account for class distinctions and structures in society. Social capital was defined as the resources an individual acquires through membership of a group⁵¹ and echoed ideas debated since the beginning of the discipline of sociology:

*That involvement and participation in groups can have positive consequences for the individual and the community is a staple notion, dating back to Durkheim's emphasis on group life as an antidote to anomie and self-destruction and to Marx's distinction between an atomized class-in-itself and a mobilized and effective class-for-itself.*⁵²

Coleman claims a different route to his arrival at the notion of social capital, tracing the origin of the concept through Laury's use of the term to describe resources derived from family and community relationships and their role in child development⁵³. Coleman's contribution to the evolution of social capital is in attempting to construct a bridge between social and economic theory. This is manifest not only in his presentation of social capital as a form of capital which is "productive, making possible the attainment of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence"⁵⁴ but in his consideration of the individual as a rational actor with a purpose to maximise utility. The aim of the bridge or framework which unites these differing theoretical perspectives is to explain how rational action can explain the development of social organisation which is underpinned

⁵¹ Bourdieu, P. (1986) p 250

⁵² Portes, A. (1998) p 2

⁵³ Coleman, J. (1994) p 300

⁵⁴ Coleman, J. (1988) p 598

by the public good aspect to social capital “the actor or actors who generate social capital ordinarily only capture a small part of its benefits.”⁵⁵

Putnam, who would go on to become an international and sales/spokesperson for the social capital approach⁵⁶, followed Coleman in identifying sub-elements of social capital which he lists as norms, networks and trust and distinguishes between two types of social capital. Bonding capital consists of strong bonds within a group such as the family unit and bridging capital which links individuals or groups with other groups:

*Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD40.*⁵⁷

He provides the body of literature with its two most quoted studies of social capital: *Making Democracy Work* (1993) which examined the performance of Italy’s regional government through measuring levels of trust and personal networks; and *Bowling Alone* (2000) a study of declining social capital in the US and its relation to the decline in participation in organisations and voluntary work. *Making Democracy Work* presents a neo Tocquevillian idea of public participation and democracy with social capital generated in the city state politics of the Renaissance whilst *Bowling Alone* adopts a civic republican tone of nostalgia for communities lost. Putnam’s studies reveal more about the cultural differences between the nations and communities under scrutiny than the universality of social capital as an analytic tool. Related to this, the UK’s Performance and Innovation Unit 2002 review of social capital literature and

⁵⁵ Coleman, J. (1994) p 312

⁵⁶ see <http://www.bettertogether.org/> and <http://bowlingalone.com/>

⁵⁷ Putnam, D (2000) p 23

research concluded that levels of social capital were influenced by a large range of factors:

*The key ones appear to be: history and culture; whether social structures are flat or hierarchical; the family; education; the built environment; residential mobility; economic inequalities and social class; the strength and characteristics of civil society; and patterns of individual consumption and personal values.*⁵⁸

Alongside this long list of determinants, the literature yields accounts identifying social capital as a causal factor or determinant in the success of a range of political issues from the role that access to strong social networks has on educational attainment (see Israel, G. et al (2001); Coleman, J. (1988)) to the role of bonding capital in preventing ill health or speeding recovery (Coulthard, M. et al (2001)). The combination of these lists of causes and effects related to social capital begs a number of big questions. Can social capital really be derived from or responsible for this diverse group of phenomena? Are the elements of social capital – norms, networks and trust a cause or effect? And where does this leave social capital studies – theoretical analyses or just descriptions?

⁵⁸ Performance Innovation Unit (2002) p 6

6.2: The Limitations of the Social Capital Approach

6.2.1: General problems

*At best social capital renames old problems associated with the multi-dimensional and conflictual nature of social stratification; at worst it glosses over them. The result is to create a field for what has previously been termed middlerange theory, analysis suspended somewhere between grand systemic theory and mere description.... Social capital thereby becomes a sack of analytical potatoes.*⁵⁹

This section will explore the critical literature on social capital and describe five of the main problems identified with the approach: conceptual problems with the term, circularity of definition, measurement problems, the dark side of social capital, and class and gender issues.

Before even considering problems of definition or measurement, a large part of the critical literature on social capital point to the conceptual limitations of the term itself and whether it can really stand alongside and be analysed in the same way as other forms of capital.

*the phrase itself is a problem. It is a metaphor that misleads: Where can I borrow social capital? What is the going interest rate? Can I move some of my social capital off-shore?*⁶⁰

This criticism highlights the issues which arise in trying to underpin a set of social phenomena with economic principles based on the actions of the individual. Fine describes this process as of the colonisation of the social sciences by economics⁶¹. Social capital, as defined by the main exponents listed previously, is something generated by interactions and relationships and

⁵⁹ Fine, B. (2002) p 22

⁶⁰ Fischer, C. S. (2005): quoted in Haynes, P. (2009) p 5

⁶¹ Fine, B. (2002) p 1

cannot therefore be conceptualised as something an individual owns or can exchange. Whilst the metaphor might be useful in placing a value on behaviours and relationships within society which help communities or organisations working, the conceptualisation of social capital as a form of capital is destabilising to both the idea and the approach.

The circularity of definition issue is another central pillar of the critical account of social capital with numerous papers pointing at the difficulty in establishing the causal relationship between social capital and cohesive communities. Is a large stock of social capital the secret of a strong, successful community or is there something inherent in the fabric and culture of a successful community which generates these networks, trust and social norms associated with social capital? As Haynes (2009) asserts, much of the difficulty in the establishing causality is linked to grouping these very complex and wide-ranging social phenomena – trust, relationships and normative behaviours – under one “umbrella term”⁶² when such phenomena depend on different social mechanisms:

*The complex nature of the interdependencies and feedback dynamics implies that linear descriptions of causality are unenlightening at best and in danger of presenting inappropriate policy instruments, and yet the literature, while acknowledging this challenge, neither address it, nor challenge the conventional direction of causality.*⁶³

Issues with causality and the disparity between the individual elements of the concept creates huge problems in measuring social capital. Empirical studies employ different methodologies and indicators to assess levels of social capital

⁶² Haynes (2009) p 11

⁶³ Ibid

in hugely varied social environments making comparative studies impossible and adding to the argument that social capital is a descriptive rather than analytical approach.

Putting on one side conceptual and operational issues and assuming social capital is manifest in a community in the ways described earlier this may not be the positive and desirable outcome that the literature presents. Sil, adopting a position reflective of Bourdieu in her analysis of school – parent networks in the USA, describes a *dark side of social capital* “wherein ends are not the same for everyone”⁶⁴ as powerful groups of parents use their connections to influence the activities of the school to suit their own aspirations. This idea of unproductive, perverse social capital (Rubio; 1997) has also been linked to organised crime (Rubio, M. (1997); Fukuyama, F. (2000)), gambling rings (Portes, A. (1998)) mistrust of outsiders by close knit familial communities (Fukuyama, F. (2000)) and economic opportunities of individual workers being obstructed by trade union activity (Olson, M. (1982)). Networks and trust can certainly build and strengthen community but often at the detriment of those outside the group boundary.

*A highly disciplined, well-organized group sharing strong common values may be capable of highly coordinated collective action, and yet may nonetheless be a social liability.*⁶⁵

Whilst a robust concept and associated theory should of course account for the negative aspects of collective activity, what this line of criticism highlights is the problem with the way in which an ill-defined and conceptualised idea has

⁶⁴ Sil, S. (2007) p 113

⁶⁵ Fukuyama, F. (2000) p 11

become an ideal for politicians and policy makers. Social capital has become an evangelical movement which advocates the creation of social capital as a tool for community cohesion without full awareness of the potential negative outcomes and in this way echoes some of the troubling aspects of the “total” communities described in the previous section.

The academic community built around social capital is itself guilty of creating the potential for division or exclusion through its failure to account for different voices in communities and continually replicating studies based on male and/or middle class activity. Lowndes highlights how high profile studies of social capital have focussed on male pursuits such as participation in sports or pub visits bypassing traditionally female dominated areas of social interaction such as babysitting. This, Lowndes argues, is the reason that social capital is not embraced in gender studies⁶⁶. The lower socio-economic classes are also overlooked in social capital studies as economic or skills poverty precludes them from joining in activities like committee work or volunteering. From a review of an extensive survey of UK government studies of social capital by the Office for National Statistics, Baron argues social capital is a middle class phenomenon with an individual’s ability to generate social capital heavily influenced by profession, education, and neighbourhood of residence⁶⁷.

⁶⁶ Lowndes, V. (2004) p 48

⁶⁷ Baron, S (2004) p 9

6.2.2: Issues with social capital concerning the sustainable community

In addition to the general conceptual and operational issues with social capital highlighted in the previous section, the following lines of argument suggest that social capital is incompatible with the idea of a sustainable community: social capital's roots in rational action theory; its association with a nostalgic view of civic republicanism; and the failure of social capital accounts to recognise the importance of the natural environment in community development.

The potential of social capital for sustainable communities is in the recognition of the social dimension to economic development but there has been little formal examination of the link between social capital and sustainable development despite widespread assumption that it is a key factor in building sustainable communities. The first issue for exploration re-visits the earlier presented argument that social capital has its roots in rational action theory and thus presents a view of the individual pursuing courses of action based on a calculation of the costs and benefits. Bridger and Luloff (2001) highlight temporal issues with the kind of long-term rationality needed to stretch across the kind of timescales which meeting the needs of future generations entails:

*If there is an indeterminate gap between some altruistic act and an expected benefit, it is not clear what would motivate an actor to behave altruistically. The norm of generalized reciprocity would only seem to hold when an actor has some expectation that a favour will be repaid within the foreseeable future. In the case of sustainable community development, which is by definition a long-term process, the time frame for repayment is difficult to envision.*⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Bridger and Luloff (2001) p11

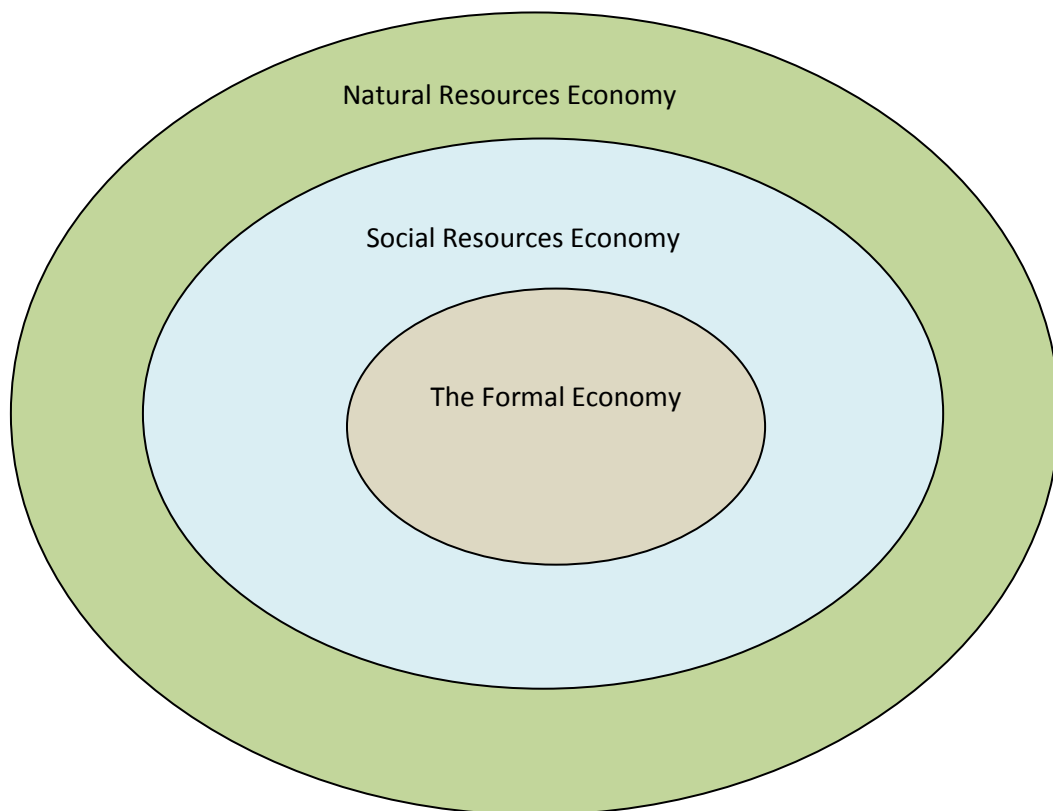
Time is also woven into the next issue for exploration. As well as incompatibility with the economic theoretical foundations of social capital, the sustainable community is also at odds with the political ideology running through the approach. Putnam's civic republican view of community is one of nostalgia, with the values driving the re-construction of community being those associated with liberal Protestantism on which American society was founded⁶⁹. It presents a perspective that stable democracy is based on homogenous culture and that the decline in social capital is associated with multi-cultural contemporary society. Putnam's assumptions appear to have been constructed through his own experiences of western society where white, middle class, patriarchal values still dominate government and civil society and which could be seen to have caused many of the issues which the sustainable development movement seeks to address. The reality of coming up with solutions to global problems – or benefitting from opportunities - arising from climate change, environmental degradation and in particular migration, requires an approach which promotes social justice and equality and makes full use of networks and relationships which transcend national borders, cultures and ethnicities.

Social capital approaches make much of the importance of the social environment – the school, council chamber, trading floor – in generating and maintaining productive relationships. As is in-keeping with an approach rooted in economic theory, the physical or natural environment does not appear to play any role in the concept. Sustainable Development, on the other hand, is most commonly visually presented as the point where economy, society and environment overlap. The Green Economic perspective presented by Scott

⁶⁹ Delanty, G.(2010) p 65

Cato (2009) is one of nested or embedded sustainable development showing the dependence of the economy on society and the environment (see Figure 1). The conceptual positioning of social capital within the formal economy (as a form of capital) makes it difficult to account for either the processes within a community that motivate sustainable behaviour or the inter-dependence between community and environment and how they co-evolve over time.

Figure 1. Nested sustainable development⁷⁰



⁷⁰ adapted from Scott Cato, M (2009) p6

If not Social Capital ...– towards a Complexity approach to community sustainability

Social capital is a useful concept. It has raised the level of understanding of the importance of the social aspect of economic development at the highest political levels from national governments to the World Bank. As a descriptive metaphor it has helped communities and their stakeholders to understand *why* certain behaviours or relationships are beneficial. The main problem with social capital is its inability to answer *how* exactly these benefits are generated. It is at best a macro concept; a phenomenon that is manifest on the “surface” of groups. It may be described, or analysed but these analyses will remain superficial with regard to the underlying dynamics which give rise to the exchange of social capital. Before social capital can circulate, the networks with their interacting dynamics need to be in place. The suggestion, by its association with other forms of capital, of a precise, measurable finished end-product that can be invested within communities is particularly problematic from a causality perspective as I have outlined. What we need is an understanding of Social capital as a series of interconnected processes - rather than either a key ingredient or a product. The term has been interpreted in different ways because it is describing different stages of these processes. Networks, norms and trust are different but interdependent phenomena which develop through micro interactions between members of groups and communities. What drives these social interactions are patterns and rules present and observable throughout the universe, not the rational behaviour of individuals based on economic principles. Circular causality causes problems for social capital analyses if we perceive the world in terms of linear dynamics. An alternative,

associated with Complexity thinking, is to consider causality as non-linear with small changes causing disproportionately large effects and with the effects feeding back into the system to either re-enforce the system's behaviour or to precipitate a major change or transformation within the system.

A Complexity approach to sustainable community development has the potential to view the processes of a community from a vantage point which focuses on the interactions between groups and individuals and between them and the external environment – rather like an aerial view. The benefit of this viewpoint is that the *how* comes to the foreground turning down the volume on all the white noise of potential *why's*- social, cultural, historical, economic, religious and myriad other possible determinants.

Complexity theory “builds on and enriches systems theory by articulating additional characteristics of complex systems and by emphasising their inter-relationship and interdependence”⁷¹. Complex adaptive systems, such as human communities, are viewed as living organisms which co-evolve over time with their natural and social environments so it is an approach which is both future-facing and embraces community as part of an eco-system. It is thus a method which focuses on process and change and rather than presenting an alternative or oppositional view to concepts like the social contract or social capital, has the potential to explore these ideas as human behaviours which emerge through the interdependent relationships in a globally connected society. Chapter 2 will review the Complexity literature to establish how a

⁷¹ Mittleton-Kelly, E (2003) p 25

sustainable community can be viewed as a complex adaptive system; surviving through co-evolution with its environment.

Chapter Conclusion

This literature review has responded to themes and concepts raised by the policy review, the project history, the empirical data and my own assumptions. As a result it has drawn from a wide variety of sources to consider the political community in resistance to the state, community as a lost ideal swept away by modernity, communities formed through asserting difference or superiority in identity, community as communication and the role which artists play in society. My own view of community remains predicated on the notion that a community is an on-going dialogue between a group of people with a common interest or identity. These common interests could be their shared location or a global concern like climate change or women's rights. The means through which individual members of the community interact and communicate will continue to adapt to changes in the environment. Increased economic activity and greater commuting distances may, for example, result in decreased interaction with our next-door neighbours but technological advances bring us low cost means to connect with like-minded individuals on the other side of the planet. These changes in the scope and range of communication demand a flexible idea of community but also of state and society. The material reviewed demonstrates a blurred distinction between community and society; between society and state. Community finds its foundations in individuals grouping together for security, to share culture and identity and to reproduce. It thus becomes the building blocks of society, economy and state – each nested within the other. Tönnies and Habermas's view of community as a place or grouping of resistance and

privacy-seeking in an increasingly mediated and governed society retains much relevance today but so too do Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau's view of community both initiating and continually negotiating the legitimacy of state power and authority. Complexity theory demonstrates that these micro interactions creating macro or global behaviours are observable in natural, physical and social systems. The paradigm offers a way to better understand the component parts of social capital as dynamic, interdependent processes which emerge from micro interactions. Chapter 2 will explore the basis for these assertions and connect the concepts of self-organisation and adaptivity with community sustainability and survival.

Chapter 2 Complex Adaptive Systems

Chapter Introduction

...complexity theories, although not widely articulated yet explicitly, are already implicitly playing a central role in science, scholarship, policy and activism for sustainability.⁷²
Jennifer Wells.

...we do not need to invent sustainable human communities from scratch but can model them after nature's ecosystems (...). Sustainable communities evolve their patterns of living over time in continual interaction with other living systems (...) it is a dynamic process of coevolution rather than a static state.⁷³
Fritjof Capra.

Complexity theory is the overarching term given to the study of complex adaptive systems. Research within this field explores additional characteristics not found in general systems thinking such as self-organisation and emergent behaviour. How communities achieve sustainability, the central theme of this thesis, brings forth many highly complex, interacting and interdependent concerns from within natural and social systems which cannot be understood using the traditional linear causality and reductionist approach associated with the Newtonian paradigm. Rather than focussing on the individual parts of a system and building a theory based on the understanding of those constituent parts, Complexity theory explores the relationships between the units of a system and between the system and its environment. The starting point with this exploration of Complexity Theory is to think of human systems and thus human communities as a Complex Adaptive System (CAS). Within the Complexity paradigm, human communities are viewed as organisms which co-evolve over time with their natural and social environments. Sustainability thus

⁷² Wells, J. (2013) p 3

⁷³ Capra, F. (2002) p200-1

becomes synonymous with survival through adaptation and the transdisciplinary nature of the paradigm allows thinking from the biological and natural sciences to lend understanding to how social systems behave like organisms – growing and communicating with an external environment.

I begin this chapter with an overview of the complexity paradigm (Section 1). How to define social systems and a discussion of the component parts forms Section 2 and Section 3 looks at how Complexity theory has been used to analyse community dynamics. In Section 4 I present criticisms of Complexity theory particularly in relation to its use in the social sciences. The key characteristics of complex adaptive systems are then introduced (Section 5) which I relate to the five major thematic data groups which surfaced in the empirical data. These connections between theme and system features form the rationale for the material reviewed and the structure of the chapter: Section 6 - self-organisation and emergence; Section 7 – feedback loops, Section 8 – co-adaptation, co-evolution and boundary; Section 9 – the influential history of the system.

Section 1 - The Complexity Paradigm

Complexity Theory is the study of complex adaptive systems. Despite its name, it is not a unified theory but brings together ideas and theories from various fields including biology, mathematics, economics, management and sociology. As one would expect with these very different disciplines, a whole variety of entities have been identified and studied as complex adaptive systems from human organs to financial markets; health services to traffic jams.

Without a single overarching theory it is impossible to come up with an objective definition of complexity. To step beyond a discipline by discipline approach to defining the concept, Manson breaks complexity into three major divisions:

- Algorithmic complexity or *mathematical complexity* which measures the complexity of a system by the difficulty faced in describing system characteristics.
- Deterministic complexity which uses chaos theory and catastrophe theory to explain how the interaction of key variables creates sudden disequilibrium in otherwise stable systems.
- Aggregate complexity which explains how the interactions of individual elements create systems with complex behaviour.⁷⁴

This final approach, with which this study is concerned, can be summarised as bridging different levels of analysis to account for both the system as a whole and the individual elements within. It thus provides an alternative to reductionist, Newtonian thinking which assumes that the study of individual elements will explain the properties and behaviour of the whole system. Complexity Theory instead makes the relationships between the components and how they hold the system together, the focal points.

In Section 5 I will outline the main characteristics of complex adaptive systems. These behaviours are all made possible by two defining qualities which make CAS distinct from simple linear systems: non-linearity and their relationality which I outline here. A linear system will display a proportionate relationship

⁷⁴ Manson, S. (2001)

between cause and effect. They respond to big changes in a big way and to small changes in an equally small and proportionate way. An example of a simple linear system is an electronic audio device where the output voltage will be proportional to the input. Linear systems can therefore be relied upon to be generally predictable. Many situations under scrutiny within the social sciences are, in contrast, complex. Small changes in initial conditions, and later interventions of whatever size, can result in disproportionately large effects. As well as asymmetry in effects, there is also the possibility of different, unexpected outcomes⁷⁵. Capra highlights that non-linear relationships are networked relationships:

*The first and most obvious property of any network is its non-linearity – it goes in all directions. Thus the relationships in a network pattern are non-linear relationships. In particular, an influence or message, may travel along a cyclical path, which may become a feedback loop. The concept of feedback is intimately connected with the network pattern.*⁷⁶

The network is a key notion within complexity thinking as a means to understand and map the many interdependent relationships within a Complex system as Gilchrist's assessment of the "Well-connected Community" reviewed in Section 3 attests. Network patterns are observed throughout the case study and feedback loops – positive and negative – are observed amplifying and minimising different collective behaviour. Feedback loops are explored in Section 7.

The focus of Complexity research is on the relationships between the elements and between the system and its environment. Cilliers' asserts that the

⁷⁵ Byrne, D. (1998) p 14

⁷⁶ Capra, F. (1996) p 82

Complexity approach is inherently anti-reductionist meaning that the system is more than merely the sum of its many parts:

*A complex system cannot be reduced to a collection of its basic constituents, not because the system is not constituted by them, but because too much of the relational information gets lost in the process.*⁷⁷

And yet the nature of the components is still important in determining the structure of the system. The “closeness” of the components⁷⁸ or agents through the space or information that they share is what causes them to interact. Defining the agents of a system becomes particularly important when considering the validity of the application of complexity to social systems as I will demonstrate in the next section. What unites the agents is also what distinguishes them and creates a relational boundary between the system and the environment to which it adapts and with which it co-evolves⁷⁹.

Section 2: Defining Social Systems

This chapter will explore the characteristics and patterns of behaviour of CAS using transdisciplinary material which finds its foundations in the natural, physical and social sciences. In order to understand whether and how the Look Group project behaves like a CAS, I have made an examination of the definitions and theories of the social system. Social systems are viewed by Westley et al as groups of people “who interact long enough to create a shared set of understandings, norms or routines to integrate action and established patterns of dominance and resource allocation”⁸⁰. This perspective positions individual humans as the component parts of the system which feels intuitively

⁷⁷ Cilliers, P. (1998) p10

⁷⁸ Johnson, S. (2007) p 13

⁷⁹ Mitleton-Kelly, E. (2003) p 8; Kauffman 1995: 216-7).

⁸⁰ Westley et al (2002) p 105

correct. Yet work on social systems by Niklas Luhmann presents an alternative hypothesis. His argument is that components of social systems are not people but communicative actions. Approaching a social system as a group of people would mean that the system could only sustain itself through biological reproduction. This would make the kinds of community which coalesce quickly around a particular interest like the Look Groups impossible as Bednarz explains:

if human beings (biological units) are the actual components of social systems what sense can be made of the concept of (re)production in this social context? (...) Social processes must produce social components. This is impossible to demonstrate even in the case of simple, informal social systems, not to mention large, formal ones like large industries, the military, schools and universities, hospitals et al.⁸¹

Another perspective of interest to this account is that the components of a social system is a dyad. Using the example of the “first system of social interaction” which humans experience, the infant-caregiver interaction, Smith⁸² highlights one of the problems with trying to understand a human social system by building models which aggregate individual behaviour. Citing neurobiological research, Smith presents the case that innate physiological systems drive attachment behaviour from which our basic need for interaction throughout life then stems. He maintains that the basic unit for analysing social systems is dyadic interaction:

the argument presented here is that you don't need a theory of the person to understand social life's deepest organizational form, the dyad (...) they are built into the physiological functioning of the species. Indeed a theory of the dyad would therefore appear to be logically prior to a theory of the individual.⁸³

Both viewpoints link well with the idea of community as communication as Chapter 1 explored and with the idea that the Look Groups under observation

⁸¹ Bednarz, J. (1988) p 61

⁸² Smith, T. (1997) p 58-9

⁸³ Smith, T. (1997) p 58

are communities grouped around conversation. To prove Smith's theory of the infant-caregiver relationship as the biological foundation of social systems is perhaps beyond the disciplinary boundaries of this research project but it throws some interesting perspective on the data relating to isolation and joining in and in connection with how successful word-of-mouth was a recruitment method compared with other techniques. Chapter 6 will question whether joining in the conversation is an essential process in developing the dyadic relationship that will ensure members of the groups do not remain isolated. Luhmann's view that a communicative act forms the component part of a social system is also useful, though in practice, communication cannot be separated from the people who conceive, deliver and interpret communicative acts. It does, however, present a useful basis from which to consider the modelling of sustainable community processes which will also be explored in the analysis and the concluding chapter.

Section 3 - Complexity and Community

When it comes to specific studies of the sustainable community using a complexity perspective, the literature facing the researcher is quite limited. An AHRC funded project *Researching Community in the 21st Century: An Annotated Bibliography*⁸⁴ reviewed hundreds of studies of community published between 2000 and 2011 for inclusion in a shortlist of 100. Within the breakdown of methods across this shortlist, only one publication was identified as using Complexity "methods"⁸⁵. Gilchrist's *The Well Connected Community*

⁸⁴ Crow, G and Mah, A. (2011)

⁸⁵ The authors of the report noted that they would have liked to have included more PhD studies in the bibliography since "a great deal of the most interesting empirical work on community is found within in-depth doctoral field studies" but were challenged in accessing digital copies.

(2004) is a guide for community development workers and is premised on the idea that “the most important aspects of community are the informal networks that exist between people, between groups and between organisations”. Gilchrist uses Kauffman’s (1993) bands of operation for complex systems – static, edge of chaos and chaotic – to illustrate different forms of human community⁸⁶. An example of a ‘static’, closed community is given as a monastery which is isolated through choice and follows rigid structures. A chaotic community is illustrated with the example of a peripheral housing estate with saturated, high density networks, little or no structure and a volatile, transient population. The edge of chaos community is exemplified as a vibrant and creative multi-ethnic neighbourhood with a stable population making full use of informal, inclusive networks to organise activities and groups. As the edge of chaos social system maintains itself in this dynamic equilibrium through self organisation of networks, relationships, traditions and behaviours⁸⁷ community is the emergent property. This approach seems somewhat suggestive of social capital’s problematic circular definition – community is the product of a community. But it reflects the strong theme within the vast literature about community that a group of individuals occupying the same space or sharing an interest does not on its own constitute a community. Gilchrist’s assertion that community is the collective equivalent of the individual consciousness which emerges through complex neural interactions in the brain begins to put some flesh onto the idea of what else besides people, place and interest go into the equation of community. Through the use of ideas from Capra’s *Web of Life*, Gilchrist also attempts to explain some of her observations

⁸⁶ Gilchrist, A (2004) p 89

⁸⁷ Ibid p.119 quoting Flecknoe and McLellan (1994) pp 7-8

of communities with principles rooted at the evolutionary biology end of the Complexity spectrum. Describing complex networks as the “pattern of all living systems, in which evolution uses chance and necessity to assemble new entities”⁸⁸, she goes on to describe how different interest groups in civil society survive in a constantly changing public environment in which competition for resources, political power and local traditions all play a role in “perpetuat(ing) existing differentials of power and privilege”⁸⁹ and that managing these forms of association has been given significant emphasis within community development work. Her shift in thinking as a result of embracing the edge of chaos model is that the purpose for these activities is not the activity itself but to provide the mechanisms and places for interaction to take place and allow the conditions for self-organisation. In spite of the formality and focus suggested by Tate as a structure for the Look Group Network, the data will reveal that this coming together in public spaces and creating new relationships that has allowed the surviving groups to develop their own autonomy. Gilchrist’s work is a useful interpretation of the characteristic behaviour of communities through a complexity lens but it is based on the general observations and recommendations of a community development professional rather than the analysis of a specific case study and qualitative data, a gap which the literature identifies (see Chapter 4). Durie and Wyatt’s 2007 study of community health⁹⁰ is a good example of interpreting community dynamics using Complexity Theory and case study data which I refer to in Section 8 in relation to co-evolution. The specificity of this study on community sustainability using a detailed case is

⁸⁸ Ibid p 90

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Durie, R. and Wyatt, K. (2007)

intended to grow the social sciences body of literature on community complexity and connect with discourse related to sustainable development.

Section 4 - Criticisms of Complexity

As previously stated, many of Complexity Theory's greatest advocates point to its usefulness in simplifying very complex processes in wide-ranging areas of scientific investigation. Manson points out, however, that without a unifying theory, Complexity theory is in practice "anything but simple"⁹¹. My overall impression of the critical Complexity literature is its scarcity which is perhaps linked to Manson's argument above – if it cannot be defined, how can it be criticised? Although its roots are observable in theories which are centuries old, such as the relationship between self-organisation and Kant's Critique of Judgment⁹², Complexity theory is dominated by the kind of zealous hyperbole characteristic of a new wave theory. Urry notes that Complexity researchers have professionalised and even glamorised the global promotion of the approach "deploy(ing) the techniques of PR and branding, international meetings with 'star' speakers, guru worship, the use of global media and publishing, funding and branding by large corporations"⁹³ which may also account for the relatively small amount of critical material found through my literature searches. For some writers in the field of complexity, it seems that any kind of social system can be viewed in this way. Flocks of birds (Waldrop, 1992), ant colonies (Johnson, 2001), financial systems (Johnson, 2009) and societies (Lewin, 1993) are given as examples of complex adaptive systems. These writers, however, are not themselves social scientists and appear part of

⁹¹ Manson, S (2000) p 405

⁹² Fox Keller, E. (2005) p 46

⁹³ Urry, J, (2005) p 2-3

the global complexity cult Urry describes, publishing titles in the popular science press. Justifiably then there has been some reticence within the social sciences in using Complexity Theory to analyse social systems.

One recurring theme is the criticism that complexity is merely a collection of metaphors and heuristics. Phelan criticises in particular the misuse of Complexity metaphors in business and organisational studies as a means for writers to inject scientific credibility into their work⁹⁴. Urry is altogether more confident with the use of Complexity metaphor in his approach to the globalisation of politics and society seeing a role for metaphor and models in helping researchers to ask the right questions about “...the enormously open character of global systems”⁹⁵.

Peter Stewart’s critique of social complexity analysis includes some robust refutes to the Complexity Turn⁹⁶ in the social sciences which are particularly relevant to this account. My interest in Complexity developed through observing and understanding how the approach was being applied in the public services to give new meaning and management strategies to complex social problems. But the approach seemed to offer contradictory positions in respect to the certainty of either cause or effect. Parts of the complexity literature pointed to the ability to mathematically model social system behaviour (eg Alisch et al (1997) on children’s friendships) whilst others emphasised the unpredictability of CAS due to the impossibility of pinpointing initial conditions in a human social context (eg Stacey (1995a) on organisations) and advocating instead “the

⁹⁴ Phelan, S (2001) pp 133-4

⁹⁵ Urry, J. (2003) p 38

⁹⁶ Traced in Urry (2005 p 5) to the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences in 1996

application of nonpositivist methods, such as ethnographies, longitudinal studies, and metaphorical analogies, which employ inductive approaches to find patterns and meaning”⁹⁷ Stewart believes that it is often the case that studies where Complexity has been applied are simple, quantifiable examples “which relate to rule-bound behaviour and situations with low levels of personal interaction” such as voting behaviour and pavement avoidance strategies⁹⁸ which are not really complex social processes. Actually viewing society through a complexity lens, he argues ignores the “complexity, opacity and particularity of social processes”⁹⁹. Complexity theory is thus seen as reductionist and the attempts to apply the concepts of the paradigm to social processes are at best clumsy. A second relevant criticism is the idea that Complexity theory is used as a meta theory in the social sciences by researchers who do not engage deeply with the social theory associated with the process they are describing. This leaves the theorist “in a weak position to make major generalizations”¹⁰⁰.

The final problem Stewart highlights is the idea that Complexity is an approach which “sit(s) unsteadily astride two traditionally antagonistic philosophic traditions: instrumentalism and enlightenment naturalism”¹⁰¹. Instrumentalism is seen through the application of Complexity to social and economic challenges whilst naturalism’s confirmation of the precedence of nature is exposed through the observation of pattern throughout the universe (particularly evident in the work of Capra and Kauffman).

⁹⁷ Levy, D. (2000) p 75

⁹⁸ Stewart, P. (2001) p 329

⁹⁹ Ibid p 323

¹⁰⁰ Ibid p 332

¹⁰¹ Ibid p 334

I accept that both of these criticisms could be levelled at this study in which summary qualitative analysis is applied to the empirical data before reviewing using a Complexity lens. My account also looked for universal patterns evolved through nature whilst exploring how could be applied as an instrument for change in the field of community sustainability. As my discussion chapter will argue, part of the rationale for using Complexity for this research project was to test Complexity as an appropriate model for public engagement. This is particularly vital, I argue, in relation to the idea of sustainability where the search for ways to manage urgent crises may need to take an equal position next to the quest for pure knowledge for its own intrinsic value. An outline approach to social theory is reflective of the audience I am writing for and in the necessity to focus on *connections* between different processes and concepts rather than the detail of the processes themselves. Where my research would meet with Stewart's approval, as study of social complexity, I believe would be in the complex nature of the project under scrutiny which involves high levels of personal and institutional interaction and the depth of penetration into the different disciplines concerned with the notion of community:

*...the nature of society and of social complexity are open questions. At present, their best characterizations are implicitly contained (amid much dross) within the combined subdisciplinary fields of the social sciences and "humanities," within local studies and local knowledge, and within traditions of phronesis and praxis (...). A complexity approach must rise to, and acknowledge these implicit—and sometimes more explicit—characterizations before claiming privileged social knowledge.*¹⁰²

¹⁰² Ibid p 348

Section 5 - Key features of Complex Adaptive Systems and thematic connections

Having outlined the Complexity paradigm, presented a rationale for its use in the understanding of sustainable communities and some key criticisms of the approach, the rest of the chapter explores in more detail the characteristics of complex adaptive systems (CAS). I begin by presenting a summary of the key features as documented in the social systems literature ((Gatrell (2005), Smith (1997), Blackman (2000))):

Complex Adaptive Systems:

They are **complex, comprising many different interacting elements**.

The **boundary between system and environment is permeable**. The boundary is thus observed as a relational property rather than one of separation.

The system can adapt to changes in its environment in ways which cannot be predicted from knowledge of the individual elements.

Self organisation occurs when **the system is dynamical and far from equilibrium** in a transition state between the formal predictability of order and the chaos of random disorder.

They are non-linear, meaning that a small change to one of the elements of the system could yield a disproportionately large change.

The system has a history which affects its present behaviour and future development.

Feedback loops are present. Negative feedback from the interaction of the system and its environment lead to a reproduction of an existing state (stagnation or status quo). Positive feedback produces a change to a new state

(transformation). The creation of unpredicted behaviours or structures through positive feedback from the environment is known as **emergence**.

The empirical data collected from the three participant groups surfaced five major themes which will be qualitatively analysed in Chapter Eight using selected theory and concepts reviewed in Chapter Three. The themes are:

- 1. Who's in charge? – Authority, control and purpose**
- 2. Resources**
- 3. Isolation and insularity**
- 4. Joining in**
- 5. Sameness and Difference**

As well as introducing Complexity theory, its protagonists and critics and providing supporting arguments for the positioning of the sustainable community as a complex adaptive system, the aim of this chapter is to explore the Complexity literature for theories to assist the Complexity analysis in Chapter Ten. The theme of authority, control and purpose is interpreted through the ideas of self-organisation and emergence; the importance of resources is linked to feedback mechanisms; isolation and insularity and joining in are related to the openness of systems and co-adaptation and sameness and difference is explored through ideas of system boundary, history and diversity. The matching of theme to theoretical concept is not precise and many overlaps occur but the list above forms the structure for this chapter and the rationale for focussing on these particular characteristics of complex adaptive systems.

Section 6 - Self Organisation and emergence: authority, control and purpose

Self-organisation is the means by which a system takes on living properties and is an essential characteristic of complex systems. It is the concept through which I will aim to explain the power relations present within the case study and

how they contribute to the sustainability of the network. “Self” refers to the system’s facility to generate its own behaviours and structure without external control or design. Self-organising systems are thus autonomous to a degree though they are in constant interaction with their environments. As Capra states living systems are not “isolated from their environment (...) they interact with it continually, but this interaction does not determine their organisation.”¹⁰³ The ‘organisation’ part of the concept is perhaps more difficult to pinpoint. Farmer highlights the problem that organisation is harder to comprehend than disorganisation and that reducing a complex system to its constituent parts will not “produce a nice, clear description of what makes it tick”.¹⁰⁴ Organisation is order, a description of how the components of a system are arranged and related to each other across time and space¹⁰⁵ to promote a particular function¹⁰⁶. In a self organising system, order occurs spontaneously¹⁰⁷ without external influence or control.

A self-organising system operates far from equilibrium meaning that the components of the system, or the external environment produce continual disturbances or perturbations. These perturbations provide a constant flow of energy or information which sustains the system through metabolism¹⁰⁸ so that it does not return to an ordered state (equilibrium) nor dissolve into chaos. For this reason self-organising systems are said to operate at ‘the edge of chaos’¹⁰⁹. Individual components at the micro level follow general principles or rules which

¹⁰³ Capra, F. 1982 p 290

¹⁰⁴ Farmer D. Quoted on Waldrop (1992) p 298

¹⁰⁵ Urry, J (2007) p 29

¹⁰⁶ De Wolf, T. and Holvoet, T. (2005) p 7

¹⁰⁷ Mitleton-Kelly, Kauffman

¹⁰⁸ Smith, T. (1997) p 61; Cilliers, P. (2000) p 24

¹⁰⁹ Goodwin, B (1995) p 170

can produce complex behaviours or structures which can be observed at a macro level¹¹⁰. These global often unexpected systems behaviours are termed **emergence**.

The iterative repetition of these simple rules of interaction creates fixed or ordered points in the system dynamics called strange attractors. The self-organising system will try to adjust the number of attractors so that it can maintain itself at a critical point between order and chaos saving resources and energy. This property of *self organised criticality* may help to explain the Look Groups' concerns about both recruitment to keep membership numbers healthy and concerns about how to manage a large group meeting. There is a critical number for maintaining a learning discussion as Chapter 6 will discuss. As Cilliers describes, too much stability can impair the ability for a system to adapt:

*It is clear that a system that only behaves chaotically is useless. On the other hand, a system that is too stable is also handicapped. If each required state of the system has to be represented by a strong, stable attractor, a lot of the resources of the system will be tied up (limiting all the degrees of freedom at a certain point means that many nodes must participate), and the capacity of the system for adaptation will be badly impaired.*¹¹¹

This description finds resonance with the idea of rule-making and formality which surfaced as a theme throughout the participant data. In particular, one of the Cornwall Council interviews echoes these ideas through a description of how voluntary organisations grow using grant funding from the public sector but are then subject to a whole host of new rules, obligations and responsibilities. The organisation, the interviewee believed, then loses its connection with its

¹¹⁰ Cilliers, P. (1998) p 92

¹¹¹ Ibid p 97

community and can only survive by relying on more grants which bring with them more structure and are resource intensive.

When considering social systems with humans who share meaning, reflexivity and foresight¹¹², self organisation takes on a rather different dynamic. Westley et al argue that sense making through symbolic communication adds a third dimension or “hierarchy” which orders the dynamics of a social system. If meaning is retained then the system can be resilient to shocks such as the loss of resources or routine and return to a point of equilibrium. Symbolic communication, they assert, accounts for social systems being able to “flip” quickly between different forms of organisation: from formal to informal, rehearsal to practice which are “qualitatively different forms of self organisation”¹¹³. The Look Groups collectively ascribed meaning to the norms and routines of the meetings. The meaning or significance of these patterns of behaviour were evident particularly through the health and wellbeing benefits the members associated with the activity. These emergent structures of signification have allowed individual groups to be resilient to changes in membership and venue.

Complex systems like the Look Groups which have been designed or externally organised pose challenges for both the researcher and ‘designer’ in understanding how power and authority are maintained. They do not fit the mould of organisations where employees willingly accept a compliance and control relationship with their employer in return for financial benefits. Some commentators (Wheatley (1994), Capra (2002), Rouse (2008)) point to the role

¹¹² Westley et al (2002) p 105 and p114

¹¹³ Ibid p 108

of leadership as an alternative to control and power. Describing a healthcare system where the majority of stakeholders are not employees, Rouse advocates for a strategy of incentivisation to moderate behaviour rather than attempting control since “no one is in charge”¹¹⁴. Capra describes this leadership style in terms of facilitation and maintaining conditions: “(t)his means creating conditions rather than giving directions, and using the power of authority to empower others. (...) Facilitating emergence means facilitating creativity.”¹¹⁵ These forms of leadership are evident in the way Tate originally negotiated meeting spaces on behalf of the groups and in the organic and distributed way in which the co-ordinators assume leadership through maintaining communication networks, venue and routine.

Power in the complex adaptive system is thus a bottom-up process of micro interactions (self organisation) which create new order and power dynamics (emergence). New emergent structures come into being through cyclical feedback loops which amplify disturbances from within the system or from its environment as the following section will discuss.

Section 7 – Feedback loops

The results chapters demonstrate that across all the participant groups, key resources were highlighted as necessary conditions for sustainability. These were the co-ordinator and the venue. Both resources control and facilitate the information flowing into the Look Groups and in the Complexity analysis (Ch. 6) I will interpret their role through the idea of feedback loops.

¹¹⁴ Rouse (2008) p 22

¹¹⁵ Capra (2002) p106

Feedback is a concept associated with different situations such as the ear-splitting noise from a microphone or the ubiquitous forms circulated after events to capture user experience and opinion. From a systems perspective, previous sections have pointed to the role of feedback in developing network patterns and in how a system's state is either reproduced or transformed. Feedback means that part of the system's outputs are returned to be re-used as an input¹¹⁶. This completion of a cycle of behaviour creates the feedback loop. Two types of feedback loop have been identified. A negative feedback loop helps to return the system back to its original conditions. An example of this type of feedback can be seen in a thermostat¹¹⁷ which responds to changes in temperature to maintain a constant ambience. Maintaining this constant can also be interpreted as maintaining equilibrium. Positive feedback by contrast responds to small changes by transforming into something new, something beyond equilibrium. If a thermostat were to respond to positive feedback loop the room would get hotter and hotter.¹¹⁸ The model given here and many others which appear in the literature (the population growth loop, cow stampede panic) are very simple and show the connection between just one or two variables. In a social system, the connections are numerous and thus communications are far more complex. Stacey highlights how these loops are continually interacting over time:

*every time two humans interact with each other the actions of one person have consequences for the other, leading that other to react in ways that have consequences for the first, requiring in turn a response from the first and so on through time. In this way an action taken by a person in one period of time feeds back to determine, in part at least, the next action of that person.*¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Stroup, W.F. (1997) p 127

¹¹⁷ Walby, S. (2007) p 464;

¹¹⁸ Johnson, S. (2001) p 137

¹¹⁹ Stacey, R. (1995) p 481

In a social system, however, these dyadic interactions described above are multiplied. Interactions involve more than person, they may cover multiple themes, be conducted over long or short periods of time and be interpreted in myriad ways – as is consistent with their non-linear dynamic. These factors make them difficult to observe as simple, iterations or loops. The group conversation is, however, recognised by Johnson as a means to clarify the effect of feedback:

*The group conversation is a kind of circuit board with primary inputs coming from the official speakers, and secondary inputs coming from the responses of the audience and other speakers. The primary inputs adjust their signal based on the secondary inputs of group feedback.*¹²⁰

Johnson points to the importance of “oblique feedback mechanisms” such as facial expression and intonation to distinguish this example from an online forum where users may choose to “lurk” – the audience is thus “present and at the same time invisible”¹²¹. These observations are mirrored in the Look Group data through the members’ rejection of the Ning. Those that valued the facility and participated did not get sufficient feedback to encourage long term use and those that did not engage revealed their anxieties about communicating without face to face contact.

The significance of the venue and the co-ordinator in the Look Groups are in facilitating the right balance of negative feedback to maintain stability and of positive feedback to enable transformation. The venue is a special case, as Chapter 6 will explain, of being both the cause and effect of communication. If, as with Luhmann’s approach, it is assumed that the components of system are communicative acts, the proliferation of messages about venues observed

¹²⁰ Johnson, S. (2001) p 151

¹²¹ Ibid p 152

directly and described by the participants indicates a presence of multiple feedback loops, enabled by face to face communication, driving the groups towards changing goals.

The interpretations of feedback loops presented here are also interesting in enabling an alternative understanding of social capital. I discussed in my review of theories of communities (Ch 1) how social capital is criticised for having a circular definition whereby cause and effect cannot be separated. The concept of feedback loops allows social capital to be reappraised as a continuous cyclical *process*. The reason that norms, networks and trust are seen as both the cause and effect of social capital is because these outputs are then re-used as inputs either to maintain things – like a community association - as they were previously or to transform them into new structures.

In social systems like organisations, feedback loops are sometimes unnecessarily limited by boundaries like tradition, history, identity and reputation¹²². These properties are essential for keeping the system together and recognisable to its environment – stakeholders, customers, policy makers and so on – but they also close the system off to new networks, knowledge and diversity.

Section 8 – Co-adaptation, co-evolution and boundary

The interaction between system and environment in the case study is expressed in several different ways. There is the tension between the Look Groups and other organisations within their environment including Tate and

¹²² Capra, F. (2002) p 107

Cornwall Council through which the groups determine their own sense of self. There are also ideas of being inside and outside of a community which relate to identity, participation and isolation. The perception of boundary from the respondents seems thus to indicate its role as a barrier but also as a place of creativity and novelty, a theme which also surfaces in the Complexity literature through the notion of co-adaptation.

8.1: The boundary of the system

The Complexity literature positions the system in an open and interactive relationship with its environment. A closed system – Morin gives the examples of a table or a stone - maintains a state of thermal equilibrium and has no external dependent relationships¹²³. A living system depends on a flow of information, energy and matter within an external source and the system – for example a flame or whirlpool – maintains itself in a state of disequilibrium in order to allow this flow of nourishment.

For Morin, this permeable boundary is ontologically real and relational and of fundamental importance to the study of complex living systems:

*Reality is therefore as much in the connection (relationship) as in the distinction between the open system and its environment. This connection is absolutely crucial epistemologically, methodologically, theoretically, and empirically. Logically the system cannot be understood except by including the environment (...) it is part of the system while remaining exterior to it.*¹²⁴

From an epistemological perspective, the boundary between system and environment can be viewed as being constructed by the observer or researcher depending on what question is being asked. This idea is particularly seen in the social sciences use of complex systems (eg Churchman (1970), Byrne (1998))

¹²³ Morin, E. (2008) p 10

¹²⁴ Ibid p 11

where the limits of the system are defined by the relevance of knowledge to a particular study¹²⁵. Byrne makes similar observations from the perspective of experimentation in the social context by identifying measurement variables as external to the system:

*Complex systems are open systems, which means that distinguishing between a system and its environment is at best a provisional activity carried out for a specific purpose. If we think about the word “intervention”—literally putting something into—we can usefully, but carefully, think about a special set of actions as external to systems, potentially variable, and therefore classifiable as variables.*¹²⁶

Maturana and Varela’s concept of an autopoietic or living system situates another perspective on boundaries within the discourse through its presentation as an “operationally” closed system¹²⁷. For an autopoietic system to maintain itself, it must be considered structurally closed or it will be “intrinsically referential”¹²⁸. In other words by defining itself in reference to something external, it loses some of its unity and sameness leaving it unable to reproduce itself internally. I will return to the idea of operational closure when considering Niklaus Luhmann’s approach to social systems (Section 3.1) but in the meantime will conclude this exploration of boundary by heeding Cilliers’ advice that the closure of the system is not “overemphasised”¹²⁹. He contends that our tendency to think of systems in spatial terms, perhaps reinforced by our human leaning towards visual metaphors and the dominance of biological systems examples in the literature is unhelpful when considering social systems that may not be in spatial proximity:

We think of systems in an “organistic” way. Social systems are obviously not limited in the same way. Parts of the system may exist in totally

¹²⁵ Midgeley et al (1998) p 468

¹²⁶ Byrne, D. (2001b) p 65

¹²⁷ Cilliers, P (2001) p 5 quoting Luhmann, N. (1989)

¹²⁸ Bednarz, J. (1988) p 57

¹²⁹ Cilliers, P. (2001) p 5

*different spatial locations. The connections between different components could be seen as virtual, and therefore the system itself may exist in a virtual space.*¹³⁰

Even a closed system, Cilliers argues, can use its boundary as a means to interact productively with its environment. Using the example of a human ear, he points to the ear drum – a membrane which forms a boundary between inner and outer ear but without which hearing would be impossible:

*We often fall into the trap of thinking of a boundary as something that separates one thing from another. We should rather think of a boundary as something that constitutes that which is bounded. This shift will help us to see the boundary as something enabling, rather than as confining.*¹³¹

I will return to this idea in the Complexity analysis to explore the role of system boundary in creating distinction through which both systems and isolated agents can recognise and introduce diversity as a means to achieve sustainability.

8.2: Co-adaptation and co-evolution

The self-organisation of a complex system can be described as adaptation when relationships between components in one system change in response to changes in neighbouring systems in which the first system is nested – its environment.¹³² Where changes in the environment are a response to changes within the system, co-adaptation will be present through which co-evolution occurs. An example of co-adaptation is the change in mosquito species and behaviour as a result of advances in human societies. The spread of malaria and other diseases through mosquitoes' bites signalled to the human population to adapt through the development of nets, drugs and repellents. The mosquitoes then developed resistance to insecticides and anti-malarial drugs

¹³⁰ Cilliers, P. (2001) p 5

¹³¹ Ibid

¹³² Lee, M (1997) p 23

through gene mutation and learning – for example that it was safe to rest on leaves but not on the walls of houses which were sprayed with DDT¹³³.

A cyclical process of evolution is thus observed: humans have adapted their social systems in response to their natural environment which the mosquito population responds to through change in order to survive. Marten describes co-adaptation and co-evolution as emergent properties of ecosystems and distinguishes co-adaptation as a process of “fitting together” which follows a co-evolutionary process of “growing together”¹³⁴. Kauffman describes co-evolution taking place on “coupled fitness landscapes”¹³⁵. The interaction of one system with its environment alters the landscape for its coevolutionary partners – the metaphorical peaks and troughs of the fitness landscape may move or disappear.

The data also pointed to isolated agents – Look Group members coming to meetings to find community or company following major life events such as retirement or relocation which required an analysis of retreat or fragmentation. Accounts of CAS, as Section 6 described, position the agents or components as autonomous, reflecting the absence of a central controller and the adherence to a set of simple rules from which complex order emerges. In social systems where the agents are humans, this perspective is made more complex by the ability of the agent to control and create their environment. The foresight and deliberative action which Westley et al referred to in relation to self-organisation and the open system boundary together account for agents choosing and being able to leave a system. This may be to join a neighbouring system but the data

¹³³ Marten, G. (2001) p 99

¹³⁴ Ibid p 95

¹³⁵ Kauffman, S. (1995) p 221

suggested many individuals had struggled to cross the boundary and make new community connections. Durie and Wyatt's complexity study of community health concluded that the isolation of community members which led to decline within a housing estate was as the result of deteriorating weak connections¹³⁶. These weak connections which link people informally through acquaintanceship are a source of new information and diversity which keep networks together. These ideas also connect with Holland's exploratory theory of signal/boundary systems which sees the identification of system building blocks as key to the understanding of co-evolution. These building blocks form at the boundaries of systems and "serve as grist for adaptive mechanism"¹³⁷.

Section 9: The influential history of the system

*...all living beings have a history. Living structure is always a record of prior development.*¹³⁸

As I described in Section 6, the system is maintained and transformed through iterative cycles of interactive self-organising behaviour between the component agents and co-evolution between the system and its environment over time. History therefore plays a pivotal role in the understanding of patterns of behaviour in the present. We are familiar with biological systems making use of inheritance to maintain a species as outlined in Darwin's evolutionary biology but the use of history in social systems is more challenging. Brian Arthur's application of increasing returns and the ideas of lock-in and path dependence in economic systems was a difficult perspective for economists from the neo-

¹³⁶ Durie, R. and Wyatt, K. (2007) p 1933

¹³⁷ Holland, J. (2012) p 27

¹³⁸ Capra, F. (2002) p 31

classical school who view the economy in perfect equilibrium as existing “outside of history”¹³⁹. Yet neo-classical economic theory also claimed that the free market would weed out inefficiencies such as in technological developments through the law of diminishing returns. But this could not explain how major anomalies such as the inefficient QWERTY keyboard or the VHS video could triumph over their more advanced competitors. Arthur’s explanation of this variance is to look to the history of these developments and note that small advantages like VHS manufacturers gaining an early market share created a ‘lock-in’ within the system as consumers and retailers were incentivised in investing in the leading brand to avoid obsolescence¹⁴⁰. As Byrne describes, the importance of history means that from a Complexity perspective we are able to perceive of social systems as “evolutionary”:

*[Systems] have histories and the histories are uni-directional. This may seem painfully obvious but the notion of an arrow of time is important. This means that social systems are path dependent - becoming is a function of what is and what has been. (...) However, there is more to the word evolutionary than simply the notion of path dependent history. Evolution implies change and moreover change which is not incremental but fundamental - changes not of degree but of kind.*¹⁴¹

In exploring this notion of the history influencing the behaviour of the system within the literature, the idea of memory is prevalent and links back to the structure of the system. Law and Urry talk of “past events [that] are never forgotten”¹⁴² and Cilliers of the system being only able to “mirror” its environment without memory¹⁴³. Adaptation to changes within the environment will be doomed unless the system can remember what has happened before.

¹³⁹ Waldrop, M. M. (1992) p 50

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

¹⁴¹ Byrne, D. (2001a) no page number

¹⁴² Law, J. & Urry, J. (2003) webpage

¹⁴³ Cilliers, P. (1998) p 92

As Capra's opening quote suggests, what distinguishes a living organism is its ability to record its progress is through its structure, this ability to maintain unitary continuity despite the "ceaseless turnover of their components"¹⁴⁴ In human social systems these experiences will be recorded and documented in multiple ways from business plans to cultural traditions. In an ecological system the "varying configurations and density of relationships between and within species"¹⁴⁵ hold this vital historical information. Manson points to the global concern for preserving biodiversity as recognition that the destruction of these memory structures through human interference in planting or harvesting certain species can lead to dire consequences when the system is unable to respond to shifts in the environment caused by the introduction of new species or climate change. By contrast Cilliers highlights the importance of forgetting, without which the system will be awash with information and using up vital resources storing it. Self-organisation is dependent on the system being able to both remember and to forget.¹⁴⁶ This idea mirrors views expressed by one of the Cornwall Council interviewees who expressed sustainability of communities in terms of making choices about what cultural resources to retain and which to let go of in a competitive public funding environment.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to synthesise different theories within the Complexity literature to explore the idea of a sustainable community from the perspective of a Complex Adaptive System. I have looked microscopically at the social

¹⁴⁴ Bednarz, J. (1988) p 57

¹⁴⁵ Manson, S (2001) p 410

¹⁴⁶ Cilliers, P. (1998) p 92

sciences literature for evidence of how community dynamics may be analysed as adaptive, self-organising processes which create emergent structures. And in contrast I have drawn on material rooted in a host of other disciplines from physics and mathematics to biological systems in order to connect to the macroscopic patterns which Complexity theorists believe are inherent throughout the universe. The chapter has also introduced the main themes which surfaced in the empirical data and the ways in which they will be interrogated as part of the Complexity analysis in Chapter 6. Whilst the critical literature on Complexity describes a reliance on metaphors, this account will argue that metaphors are an essential tool for creating bridges between different levels of understanding. Complexity offers imagery and ideas which are woven into the fabric of shared human understanding and thus offers a fertile platform on which to explore, analyse and model challenging ideas like a sustainable community. The literature reviewed here represents my preferences for a good reading list for my community of interest (study participants and academic colleagues) as well as future students of community using Complexity principles. As Fritjof Capra's opening quote suggests, the sustainable community can be modelled on nature's ecosystems. This review of Complexity literature has introduced the characteristics of complex systems and their interaction with their environment which will enable, in Chapter 6, an analysis of the extent to which a sustainable community could be modelled on the Look Group Network.

Manson concludes in his review of complexity literature, that "the value of Complexity lies in the eye of the beholder"¹⁴⁷. The different ways which

¹⁴⁷ Manson, S. (2001) p 412

researchers are choosing to engage with Complexity from seeing it as a complementary approach to their more usual theoretical perspectives or embracing it as a paradigm shift have consequently resulted in identical findings being interpreted in very different ways. Like Manson, I would like to see more studies of human systems which test the limitations of the many theories under the Complexity umbrella and critically assess their appropriateness to social, political and economic cases. My contribution towards this aspiration is a deep qualitative approach to understanding the dynamics of a complex system of interdependent learning groups. The following chapter explores the extent to which the theories of community and my interpretations of sustainability as survival through adaptation and self-organisation can be detected within recent policy initiatives.

Chapter 3 – Political and Policy Context

Chapter Introduction

This second part of my exploration of the context for the research project examines the political and policy environment which has framed this study. The principal concept under investigation here is the sustainable community but I also provide a substantial assessment of informal adult learning – this with a view to explore where there might be deliberate or unintended overlap between the outcomes of differently motivated political interventions at a community level and whether this may be due to a shared conceptual or political origin.

Over the course of this research project colleagues and participants have questioned whether sustainability was the best term to use for framing for this study. Community security, resilience and social cohesion were all suggested. My selection of community sustainability as the major subject matter for the research is in part due to the ESF funding theme through which my studentship had been secured and reflected the currency which the term had at the beginning of the project. As this chapter will document, the sustainable community seemed to disappear from political debate and policy use with the start of the Coalition government in 2010 but with the continued and pervasive media application of the term “Sustainability” to issues from the survival of the planet to staffing levels in hospitals, I believe I would have struggled to find another term which would have provoked such wide ranging and interesting views from within a non-expert group of respondents. As the Carnegie Trust, who funded a “community resilience” study concluded, often the terms of reference can be interchangeable but the emphasis must be on getting a reaction that will invoke change:

*In some places using the term 'community resilience' might help to galvanise a group into action; in others, it might be off-putting. Ultimately, it doesn't really matter what this work is called: what matters most is that it helps people future-proof their communities on the basis of agreed values.*¹⁴⁸

My exploration of the sustainable community in Section 1 begins with an historical analysis of the term sustainable community, focussing in particular on how the term has been used by successive UK governments since the late 1980s, and its roots in the global sustainable development movement. Of particular interest is the way in which Cornwall Council has interpreted these principles in the development of relevant local policy including the Cornwall Sustainable Communities plan. The fading of the sustainable community as a national policy goal begins with the advent of David Cameron's Big Society in 2009 provides a crossroad in the policy literature at which to stop and consider alternative guises and policy drivers for the sustainable community and the shifting of responsibilities for its realisation. Responding to the themes of enjoyment in contrast with formality as criticisms of the Big Society, Section 2 explores academic and political perspectives on adult informal learning, tracing the history of this aspect of community life from some of its earliest manifestations to its most recent evolution in the UK as *community learning*. The final section of the chapter attempts to bring the two halves of policy concerns – sustainability and informal learning together to present recent examples of government using informal learning as a tool through which to achieve sustainable outcomes for communities.

¹⁴⁸ Carnegie UK Trust (2011) p 4

Section 1: The Sustainable Community

Where did the Sustainable Community come from?

The term “sustainable community” came into widespread use in the UK with the introduction of the Sustainable Communities plan devised by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG – previously the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister) in 2003. The Department’s responsibilities include local government, building and planning regulations, community resilience, regeneration, local enterprise partnerships and the fire and rescue services and the Sustainable Communities Plan was an umbrella strategy which in effect brought together numerous policies to form a spatial strategy for England. The quote below illustrates the wide range of policy areas and skills which the plan needed to mobilise:

*Sustainable communities meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, their children and other users, contribute to a high quality of life and provide opportunity and choice. They achieve this in ways that make effective use of natural resources, enhance the environment, promote social cohesion and inclusion and strengthen economic prosperity.*¹⁴⁹

The definition - which in subsequent documents begins, rather more realistically, to be referred to as a goal rather than an designated classification - draws inspiration from a host of international debates and concerns including climate change, social inequality and justice, globalisation, migration and sustainable development and particularly echoes academic discourses on the limits of growth¹⁵⁰ and the 1987 United Nations Brundtland Report. This report defined sustainable development as:

¹⁴⁹ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2004) p7

¹⁵⁰ Schumacher, E. (1999)

*development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”*¹⁵¹

This statement broke down the field of sustainable development conceptually into three constituent parts: environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and socio-political sustainability. From this common starting point the sustainable development literature has now developed a range of typologies for interpreting sustainability. One example¹⁵² locates different versions of sustainability along a continuum from ‘weak to strong’. The weak perspective is also known as ‘anthropocentric’ because it emphasises human needs and views humans as the sole determinants of value judgments. This weak version of sustainability assumes neoliberal economic solutions and technological substitution¹⁵³ can overcome global environmental problems and implies that in decision making, environmental issues should be traded off against economic and social considerations¹⁵⁴. The major criticism of this position is that there are a great many environmental assets which cannot be substituted – the ozone layer, rainforest eco systems and pollution absorbing wetlands are just a small sample of examples¹⁵⁵. The ‘strong’ perspective of sustainability has the alternative label of ‘ecocentric’. The ecocentric perspective positions humans and non-humans as equal and argues that the latter cannot be instruments of the former¹⁵⁶. In decision making, strong interpretations of sustainability acknowledge that trade-offs between environmental, social and economic issues are inevitable but suggest that some “environmental systems, goods, beliefs and values are critical and should be exempt from any process of trade

¹⁵¹ United Nations (1987) Ch 2.1

¹⁵² Owens, S. and Cowell, R, (2002); Dresner, S. (2008)

¹⁵³ Dresner, S. (2008) p 81

¹⁵⁴ Bulkeley, H. and Betsill, M.M. (2003) p 21

¹⁵⁵ Pearce, D. et al (1989) p 37-38

¹⁵⁶ Dresner, S. (2008) p 139

off”¹⁵⁷. Whilst acknowledging that trade-offs can fall within a social category, the accounts reviewed above give only examples of technological substitution for environmental goods and do not illustrate what social negotiation or agreements might be required or exempted. .

The spectrum of perspectives on sustainability invokes serious questions about who makes decisions about what is sustained and how to do this in an equitable manner? Commentators (Parr (2009), Hempel (1999), Agyeman & Evans (2004)) argue that this puts a greater emphasis on the importance of social justice in the sustainable development debate to ensure that these decisions have the interests of the majority and not the few at their heart. Hempel, argues that “the emerging sustainability ethic may be more interesting for what it implies about politics than for what it promises about ecology”¹⁵⁸. Referring to it as a “culture” Parr highlights sustainability as the means via which: “*societies designate the specificity of their historical condition in material form (...) the concern is not so much with ends (...) as it is how sustainability becomes the political attitude of the masses.*”¹⁵⁹ Both perspectives point to sustainability as a dynamic, social process which encompasses every aspect of human life through the adherence to basic rules.

Whilst global, top-down strategies and policies like the Brundtland report are clearly needed to raise international awareness of issues affecting our shared environment and legislation, such as measuring the environmental impact of public buildings, are necessary; governments must also cultivate local, bottom

¹⁵⁷ Bulkeley, H. and Betsill, M.M.(2003) p 21

¹⁵⁸ Hempel, L.C. (1999) p 43

¹⁵⁹ Parr, A. (2009) p4

up processes which offer engagement and participation opportunities to communities to define and communicate their specific values and material assets (Bell and Morse (2008), Agyeman and Evans (2004), Cairns (2003)). The community thus becomes an important democratic unit or tool through which government can operate at a local level. The UK Sustainable Communities Plan embraced this approach. As well as advocating for greater community involvement in addressing sustainability, subsequent strategies including The Egan Review: Skills for Sustainable Communities put in place the means for communities to acquire specific skills to facilitate engagement. It further recognised that these skills would contribute to the ultimate sustainability of the community through making a direct link to the idea of trade offs and substitutions:

*Temporary trade-offs, where some components have to take a back seat while other priorities are addressed, are perfectly acceptable as long as the long-term trend for each component is in the right direction – towards the sustainable future. Decisions about such trade-offs will require sound judgement, as well as leadership and communication skills.*¹⁶⁰

The national Sustainable Development Strategy (2005)¹⁶¹ continued to emphasise the importance of communities in achieving sustainability as exemplified by the integration of sustainable development into Regional Spatial Strategies followed by The Sustainable Communities Act 2007 which brought together mechanisms such as Local Area Agreements (LAA) and Comprehensive Area Assessments (CAA) to allow communities to challenge decisions being which might compromise the overall well-being of their locality.

¹⁶⁰ OPDM (2004) p 27

¹⁶¹ DEFRA (2005)

1.2 The Sustainable Community in Cornwall

With the previous section having provided evidence of national government placing strong emphasis on the community as a tool through which to negotiate and direct sustainable development through both strategy and legislation, I now turn to the local authority level to seek out examples of how the sustainable community has been realised through policy and public management in Cornwall.

The period of this research falls between two of Cornwall Council's sustainable community strategies. The first was the *Sustainable Community Strategy for Cornwall: Shaping Cornwall's Future* published in 2008 which was followed by *Future Cornwall* in 2010 which outlines priorities to 2015 to achieve a vision of economically stable, resilient, healthy and low carbon communities by 2030.¹⁶² The most obvious difference between the two documents is the tone and language used. Although this may obviously be attributable to a change in author or authors, the 2008 document nevertheless presents an optimistic view of achieving community sustainability through partnership and mutual support which may reflect the less pressured political and economic environment in which it was authored. The first page of the strategy refers to individual community's "happiness" multiple times¹⁶³, a word which does not feature at all in the later document, written at a time of swingeing public spending cuts – see Appendix 1. The 2008 strategy also makes appropriate references to the mechanisms of community participation in sustainable development laid in national strategies already referenced such as LAAs and CAAs which were superseded by the Local Development Framework in 2010. The tone of the later

¹⁶² Cornwall Council (2010) pp 14-16

¹⁶³ Cornwall Strategic Partnership (2008) p6

document is nevertheless full of confidence but focuses on more competitive aspirations for the region as a whole rather than for individuals, such as “leading the country in sustainable living”¹⁶⁴ The second and more significant difference to note is the decentralisation of strategy ownership in Future Cornwall. In 2008, Cornwall Strategic Partnership was awaiting the rollout of the One Cornwall development programme which would see the demise of the District Councils and an enhanced role for Town Councils. The strategy was to be delivered in partnership but the new Cornwall Council would have a central steering role and overall budgetary responsibility. Hence only a small reference was made to the role that new features of devolved authority like the Community Network Areas could play in delivering sustainable development¹⁶⁵. Future Cornwall is positioned as a “*framework for organisations to link their own strategies and plans and to combine investment and resources for common goals*”¹⁶⁶. Specific objectives are written into the plans of a host of partner organisations which include citizens and neighbourhood groups, social, private and public providers and the Town and Parish Councils. The precise mechanisms for how these objectives will be developed to create coherent and measurable outputs and outcomes for Cornwall are not detailed, furthering my view of the document as an overarching manifesto, perhaps for use to attract external funds or private investors, rather than a specific strategy that will deliver sustainable outcomes for communities in Cornwall. Another interesting reference, which also surfaced in the Cornwall Council interviews, is the idea of “double devolution” in which Cornwall Council would assume more responsibility from central government and devolve powers to the town and

¹⁶⁴ Cornwall Council (2010) p19

¹⁶⁵ Cornwall Strategic Partnership (2008) p29

¹⁶⁶ Cornwall Council (2010) p18

parish councils. A role for civil society organisations is also highlighted which is described as “making (the) Big Society real”.¹⁶⁷ With Cornwall Council having assumed the role of a commissioning, regional authority with little ‘hands on’ aspirations for contributing to a sustainable vision for Cornwall’s communities, it is necessary to look to the Community Network Areas and Town and Parish Councils for evidence that a sustainable development agenda is being achieved at a community level.

Internet research reveals a host of activity taking place at a sub-regional level which renews my faith that the notion of the sustainable community is still being pursued in Cornwall even if under a new label. One example which seemed to exemplify a connected and participatory approach to community planning was the U-Choose Cornwall project. This participatory budgeting initiative ran a number of events across Cornwall in 2010, the most rural of which was in the China Clay region which has a higher than average population of low-income families and lone parents and above average rates of health problems like obesity. The case study which reports the project, stated that the population had “been hard to reach and engage in new initiatives”¹⁶⁸. It was also an area in which Tate St Ives were unable to get the planned Look Group running - which furthered my interest in the project. The events invited residents to have a say in nominating and voting for allocating worthwhile community projects in the area. 260 votes were returned which not only constituted the biggest turnout for all the Cornwall projects but represented a marked improvement on participation in consultation on the Parish Plan and other key local strategies.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid p20

¹⁶⁸ PBU (2010) p 9

Other examples such as active Transitions Towns schemes in seven areas of Cornwall, the growth of Exeter University's Environment and Sustainability Institute at the Penryn Campus near Falmouth and their work with community groups and schools to inform their research projects, The Eden Project's work with their local communities including the China Clay Local Action Group¹⁶⁹ and participatory research as part of Cornwall's Cultural Destinations programme to explore the impact of culture on community sustainability all serve to illustrate that organisations and communities in Cornwall are indeed rising to the challenge of double devolution. In a region of dispersed and ageing populations, the likelihood that there will be sufficient and widespread capacity to ensure that each and every community can garner the necessary resources and direction to achieve sustainable outcomes without the local authority providing physical and political connectivity seems unlikely, particularly when cuts are continuing to be made to vital services like bus routes and libraries. Many of the examples given are projects with external funders – U Choose Cornwall was funded by the Participatory Budgeting Unit (part of the Church of England) and Eden's Sustainable Community Engagement Programmes was part financed through DCLG's Supporting Communities and Neighbourhoods in Planning scheme. Connecting to broader ideas and national thinking on sustainability through a diversity of different partners connects with Cornwall Council's aspirations to be outward looking and (see Appendix 2) but the organisation must recognise its role in uniting planning, strategising and attracting funding at a community level to ensure that each community has access to the same opportunities and that the collective activity adds up to a

¹⁶⁹ <http://www.edenproject.com/whats-it-all-about/places-and-regeneration/neighbourhood-planning>

sustainable story for the whole of the region and not just isolated pockets of excellence.

1.3 Where did the Sustainable Community go? A new guise.

Evidence of the demise of the sustainable community's agenda is presented in the form of the Deregulation Bill 2014/15. Since the Local Government Act 2000, local authorities in England and Wales have had a legal duty to develop strategic sustainable community plans. The Government's deregulation bill 2014/15 includes provision to repeal this clause justifying this decision by claiming that it will reduce red tape and save time and money for local authorities who in any case will be legally required to consult with stakeholders as part of statutory obligations outlined in the Localism Act 2011. The main aim of the bill is to help to speed up the building of housing, which in some part of the UK is in seriously short supply. It would appear from the comments recorded in the debate of the bill that sustainable community strategies are part of the bureaucracy responsible for low housing stocks and that *trusting* local authorities would be more appropriate than top down legislation:

*Councils should be trusted to produce strategies of this nature as a matter of course, and we believe that the existing duty represents an unnecessary statutory burden.*¹⁷⁰

Whether this trust is well-founded and the development of sustainable community strategies will continue without the legal duty in place remains to be seen and falls outside the extended time period of this study. Another policy area which has never been very far from the headlines during this research

¹⁷⁰ Heald, O. in House of Commons Hansard (2014) 54 c455

project and which surfaced in the participant data was the Big Society. The following section explores whether the principles of the sustainable community are visible under a policy umbrella which has been criticised as a “new rendering”¹⁷¹ of old ideas.

1.4 Big Society

*....people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace...don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face.....but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities. It's about people setting up great new schools. Businesses helping people getting trained for work. Charities working to rehabilitate offenders. It's about liberation – the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street. You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it freedom. You can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society.*¹⁷²

*Isn't the Big Society being implemented by the government? Doesn't that make it inherently top-down? The irony seems lost on most who are eager to jump on the Big Society bandwagon.*¹⁷³

It is hard not to draw comparisons between the self-organising qualities of the Look Group Network and the ideas of the Big Society and some of those I interviewed asked me whether the research project would investigate the idea. The members of Look Groups also fit the profile of the ‘usual suspects’ for volunteering which the Big Society aims to both utilise and empower. Many are educated to a high level, have relevant professional and/or community skills and are in their retirement years so have both the skills and time to make it work.

¹⁷¹ Twivy, P. (2012)

¹⁷² Speech by PM David Cameron: Cabinet Office (2010)

¹⁷³ Stott, M. (2010) p 20

And whilst many of the members enthusiastically undertake volunteer roles within their groups from co-ordinator to discussion facilitator, the results suggest a resistance to too much structure or direction from the outside – particularly if that direction is to fulfil a political agenda.

There are also conclusive links between the aspirations expressed under the Big Society banner and the theory and policies underpinning the notion of the sustainable community. The Big Society literature is ripe with references to social justice and empowerment which chime with models of social sustainability whilst public service reform has a strong association with economic sustainability. The emphasis on the role of the voluntary sector and opening up new ways to create active citizens is also closely aligned both generally with the duty outlined for local authorities in the Local Government Act to publish sustainable community strategies, and in the specific sustainable community strategy relevant to this context published by Cornwall Council.

Big Society finds its roots in the tension between the individualistic perspective of Thomas Hobbes “Leviathan” and Edmund Burke’s natural state of civil society in which man is a social animal¹⁷⁴. I revisit these themes in relation to the concept of community in Chapter 1. The policy was one of the cornerstones of the Conservative Party’s 2010 election manifesto and attracted widespread media interest, particularly because it was seen to position David Cameron’s approach to leadership in contrast to that of Margaret Thatcher who famously claimed that there was “no such thing as society”¹⁷⁵. Observers and critics

¹⁷⁴ Norman, J. (2011) “The Intellectual Origins of the Big Society” in *Total Politics* <http://www.totalpolitics.com/articles/45293/the-intellectual-origins-of-the-and39big-societyand39.html>

¹⁷⁵ Keay, D. (1987) “Interview with Margaret Thatcher for Woman’s Own” <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>

eagerly awaited further news which appeared slow in its development; resulting in The Big Society going through four official launches with only minimal detail being released in the final event in May 2011¹⁷⁶. Proponents of the Big Society emphasised that this was an umbrella for numerous areas of policy¹⁷⁷ including public service and spending reform, increasing active citizenship and volunteering, and ensuring transparency and accountability¹⁷⁸ but eventually a range of initiatives were unveiled with a specific Big Society ‘branding’. These included the National Citizens Service for young people¹⁷⁹; a Community Organisers Programme to develop and train a “neighbourhood army” of 5,000 community professionals across the UK¹⁸⁰; the building of a Big Society Network¹⁸¹, the Big Society Awards for outstanding achievement¹⁸² and the Big Society Bank offering grants and loans¹⁸³. Other policy initiatives associated with the Big Society included the Localism Act 2011 which gave new rights to charitable and voluntary sector organisations to bid to deliver local authority services and the compilation of the *Assets of Community Value* list for each Council. The Big Society was also associated with sweeping changes to education policy. The controversial Free School policy which, through the 2010 Academies Act, gave charitable trusts the ability to apply to run schools without the intervention of the local authority and with funding, including capital costs, provided directly from the Department for Education. Section 3 will also review the 2010 BIS Skills for Sustainable Growth strategy which promised to build the

¹⁷⁶ Rowson, Mezey & Dollot (2012) p7

¹⁷⁷ Norman, J (2012) Foreword in Rowson, Mezey, Dollot

http://www.thersa.org/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/565411/NEW-NEW-COVER-Beyond-Big-Society-report-V10.pdf

¹⁷⁸ Evans, K. (2011) p 165 “Big Society’ in the UK: A Policy Review” in *Children & Society Volume 25, (2011) pp. 164–171*

¹⁷⁹ <http://www.ncsyas.co.uk/>

¹⁸⁰ King et al (2010)

¹⁸¹ <http://www.thebigsociety.co.uk/>

¹⁸² <http://www.bigsocietyawards.org/>

¹⁸³ <http://www.bigsocietycapital.com>

Big Society through reform and reinvigoration of the adult and community informal learning.

Whilst supporters of the Big Society claim the idea is rooted in empowering civil society, cutting red tape and allowing citizens to take control of those aspects of life which they value the most; critics see Big Society as a means to justify ideologically driven shrinkage of the public sector and a reliance on volunteer labour whilst private sector investors grow businesses that will eventually make a profit from these foundations in goodwill and charity. Evans highlights this as a fundamental moral flaw in the Big Society approach to using volunteer labour to replace public sector professionals:

*A reliance on volunteers where once we paid professionals for the same work, or a reliance on private donations where once we paid collectively through taxation, risks exploiting the fundamental altruism and freedom in the giving of one's time and money as a gift.*¹⁸⁴

Additional issues highlighted in Evan's review are the uneven spread of willing and able volunteers across the country, which leave some communities without the necessary infrastructure to "help themselves" and the fact that volunteer time is not free from costs. Essential training, certification and mentoring are required to ensure volunteer delivered services comply with legislation to ensure safety and security. The fears that using the Big Society umbrella to shroud the dismantling of the public sector in order to benefit individual private sector businesses established a new dramatic footing with the announcement (July 2014) of an investigation into the misuse of public funds by businesses associated with the Big Society Network.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ Ibid p166-7

¹⁸⁵ The Guardian 26 July 2014

This section exploring the Big Society was not intended to dissect or condemn the approach – though my review of the literature reveals a wealth of critical material¹⁸⁶ which echoes my own sentiments about the policy driver. The Big Society is reviewed here to respond to assertions from the research participants that it was similar to the idea of a sustainable community and to investigate the clear alignment with bottom up principles of involving and empowering local communities in identifying values and material assets which need sustaining. Where the approaches differ are in the Big Society's strategy to not only empower communities but give them the responsibility to run public services as part of the reform of public spending. But this again, whilst not explicitly using the term 'sustainable', it could be argued is a sustainability strategy because it gives communities the real power, thus protecting them from the inevitable changes to policy and funding which come with every election, re-shuffle or restructure. This assertion would, however, ignore the connectivity of different levels of government influence and the increasing encroachment by government into community life. Communities will not be insulated from changes within central government and through the Big Society approach they will have increased obligations but without the financial and institutional infrastructure they need to be resilient to unanticipated situations. Knox also argues that in the case of climate change, a strong state will be important in joining up the efforts of individuals and communities to create nationwide initiatives that address areas of mitigation or adaptation such as "food growing schemes and supporting energy reduction measures".¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ See Evans, K. (2011), Macmillan, R. (2010), Rowson, Mezey & Dellot, (2012)

¹⁸⁷ Knox, K. (2010) p 79

Throughout my review of the policy and literature on Big Society it has been hard to see beyond the paradox identified by Stott and quoted in the opening of this section. Anna Cootes from the New Economics Foundation similarly identifies with this contradiction:

*People usually volunteer to take part in local activities when they find them optional, small-scale, convivial and life enhancing. And all this sounds a bit (...) conditional, formalised, complicated and hard graft.*¹⁸⁸

I have selected this extract to link to the next section of this chapter which explore the adult informal learning political context. Coote's words could equally be describing the tensions within the adult education literature and policy regarding the focus, structure and intent of informal learning programmes.

Section 2: Informal Learning Policy and Practice

*"Researching the pleasures and wonder of learning is of itself a deeply contested and politically charged arena, with debates often polarising around whether learning 'should', in fact, be 'fun'. However, we are living through an era of intense interest in learning, especially its economic importance in the 'knowledge economy', an economy that, we are often told, will require not only formal educational experiences, but 'lifelong learning' in a range of sites and over sustained periods of time. An interest in out-of-school informal learning is, therefore, much more of a mainstream political concern now."*¹⁸⁹

The nature of the Look Group case study – an adult informal learning project funded by central government - demands an examination of the relationship between government and community learning. As the first part of this chapter has demonstrated, the fields of sustainable development and informal learning

¹⁸⁸ Coote, A. (2010) extract from speech

¹⁸⁹ Sefton-Green, J. (2006) p 10

are never far from one another and in the conclusion I will argue that this is due to their close conceptual roots.

The adult education academic literature provides a range of different learning typologies through which to understand and appraise the characteristics of the Look Group project but attention must also be paid to the ways in which these classifications are realised through the means of the public purse. Political definitions of informal learning are notoriously inconsistent and change to accommodate ideological and popular values. Charting the swing between the inclusion and exclusion of vocational learning within a category of education that is otherwise concerned with enjoyment or socialising is one such challenge I have undertaken. This then led me to a consideration of how contrasting policy outcomes associated with adult learning and education - such as a strong, skilled workforce and healthy, happy communities are in turn connected with the sustainable community. The opening chapter quotation, from a literature review of informal learning for children in out-of-school settings, also points to shifts in potential audiences for informal learning from adults to children.

The seemingly simple idea of a Look Group, in which members come together to talk about art, belies the complexity of different influences on the model. Look Groups mimic book groups in both name and nature with members directing their own learning at each meeting and assuming responsibility for aspects of administration such as choosing topics for discussion and accessing resources. There is no agreed curriculum or teacher but as all the groups have an ongoing relationship with the founding organisation, Tate St Ives, there are

common external influences. The Look Groups can all gain free access as a group to the Tate St Ives exhibitions which in turn influences the topics for discussion. The provision of public venues for some of the groups also places them under the legislative guidance of Tate in terms of health and safety. The Look Groups are also conceptually slippery in terms of the kind of knowledge being acquired. As the data presented in Chapter 5 will attest, the Look Groups engage in focussed art discussions and more fleeting social conversations which contribute to different forms of learning: facts about the life and work of an artist are contrasted with information about local services for example. There is also the question of tacit knowledge and skills some of which relate to the sustainability of the group: strategies for recruiting new members, how to manage a discussion and encouraging each other to participate without dominating.

These interpretations of learning: informal, self-directed, tacit and yet also still externally and politically influenced which have surfaced through the focus group data, policy analysis and my own experiences of setting up the project are explored in the following subsections. The first explores the academic literature in search of definitions of informal learning and concludes that the relationship between the academic and political understandings of the concept are tightly woven together by mechanisms such as state funded research programmes and intended policy outcomes for particular publics. The second subsection provides a historical account of the development of informal learning as a political instrument documenting the range of institutions delivering publicly funded informal learning programmes with a particular focus on visual art and gallery learning. Acknowledging the tenuousness of the link between such

forms of learning and the sustainable community, a review of informal learning for sustainability is also included.

2.1 Academic perspectives of informal learning

2.1.1 The scope of the literature

Within the academic literature, adult informal learning forms part of the field of inquiry for a range of disciplines including adult education, psychology, sociology and public management and whilst marginalised by other forms of learning and education, there is a lively debate between commentators concerning the parameters of the concept. Livingstone highlights the “confusion among adult learning researchers over types of learning”¹⁹⁰ pointing out the difficulties in separating fundamental concepts such as education from learning, theoretical from practical knowledge, teacher from learner and curriculum bounded from self directed learning. They form part of the explanation for informal learning’s position at the outer reaches of the adult education literature which Coffield describes as “a strong tendency for policy makers, researchers and practitioners to admit readily the importance of informal learning and then to proceed to develop policy, theory and practice without further reference to it.”¹⁹¹ Livingstone argues that “(o)ther adult learning activities have tended to be ignored or devalued by dominant authorities and researchers either because they are more difficult to measure and certify or because they are grounded in experiential knowledge which is more relevant to subordinate social groups”¹⁹². Contexts for informal learning such as the community, family or peer groups fall

¹⁹⁰ Livingstone, D.W. (2003) p 1

¹⁹¹ Coffield, F. (2002) p 2

¹⁹² Livingstone, D. W. (2003) p 4

outside of the interest of researchers because they also fall beyond the reach of state support or intervention and thus do not form part of the public debate on learning and education¹⁹³. The second part of this chapter will explore the policy evidence for this claim. Where informal learning does appear to be gaining momentum as a research concern is in relation to the workplace with numerous studies (see Eraut (2004); Lohman (2000, Dale & Bell (1999)) pointing to its significance in industry and productivity, thus providing further evidence of the research field being influenced by economic factors.

2.1.2 Definitions of adult informal learning

There is agreement within the literature that a continuum or spectrum of learning experiences exists which reflect differences in structure, facilitation, location and intent (see Eraut, M. (2004), Livingstone, D. W. (2003), Shugersky, D. (2000)). At one end is formal learning which exhibits characteristics such as:

- A prescribed learning framework;
- An organized learning event or package;
- The presence of a designated teacher or trainer;
- The award of a qualification or credit;
- The external specification of outcomes.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Sefton-Green, J. (2006) p 10

¹⁹⁴ Eraut, M. (2000); quoted in Smith, M. (2008) online source

Shugerensky is more prescriptive, stating that formal learning describes a form of compulsory basic education provided by the state for children or adults. It is supported by a hierarchical system of institutions and divided into different levels each with its own curriculum, method of assessment and means of certification. The end goal of each level is to acquire the skills and knowledge to progress either to the next level or into the workplace¹⁹⁵.

At the centre of the continuum, non-formal learning comprises learning experiences which fall outside of the formal education system described above. Non-formal education is organised, may follow a curriculum under the direction of a teacher (instructor or facilitator are also terms used) and may offer accreditation. In contrast to formal learning however they are most usually short term and voluntary programmes and there is usually have no required qualifications to take part. Examples thus include: “a wide variety of programs such as tennis courses, second language programs, driving lessons, cooking classes, yoga classes, rehabilitation programs, painting courses, training programs, workshops, etc.”¹⁹⁶

Informal learning is positioned at the opposite end of the continuum to formal learning and is defined as “a residual category of a residual category (anything that it is neither formal nor non-formal)”¹⁹⁷. Informal learning could therefore entail the acquisition or modification of any knowledge, skills, behaviours or values taking place outside an organised learning setting. Eraut’s criticism of the term ‘informal’ because of its association with “so many other features of a situation – dress, discourse, behaviour, diminution of social differences, etc. –

¹⁹⁵ Shugerensky, D. (2000) p1

¹⁹⁶ Ibid p2

¹⁹⁷ Ibid p1

that its colloquial application as a descriptor of learning contexts may have little to do with learning per se”¹⁹⁸ is well founded although I find his alternative term non-formal rather bland and unaccommodating for either promoting an activity or conducting participatory research with informal learners. Smith, in response to Eraut, more helpfully urges researchers to move away from the administrative setting or context of the learning and focus instead on “the characteristics of the learning process”¹⁹⁹. Shugerensky’s three types of learning are a useful typology built around two categories of intentionality and awareness. I have adapted the table from this paper to include examples reported from the Look Group data to place these different forms of learning into the project context.

Figure 2: Three Types of Learning Table²⁰⁰

Form	Intentionality	Awareness (at the time of learning experience)	Example from the Look Group Data.
Self-directed	Yes	Yes	Collectively deciding on the subject matter for each meeting; individuals researching topic and preparing learning materials
Incidental	No	Yes	Learning about social connections, networks and the strengths and passions of individual members
Socialisation (Tacit learning)	No	No	Groups learning how best to manage discussions eg. preventing domination by some and encouraging those with less confidence

¹⁹⁸ Eraut, M. (2000) p 114

¹⁹⁹ Smith, M. (2008) online

²⁰⁰ Adapted from Shugerensky, D. (2000)

Shugerensky notes that although learning through socialisation is usually an unconscious process “we can become aware of that learning later on through a process of retrospective recognition, which could be internal and/or external”²⁰¹. This phenomenon was reported widely at the Look Group Research and Networking Day (see Appendix 1) with members relaying how the experience of being part of a research project had made them reflect on their achievements in learning and appreciate their own role in sustaining the group. Distinguishing these types of learning by intentionality and awareness is useful thus in highlighting the role which reflection can play in both sustaining a learning process and in accessing and applying unconscious knowledge or skills.

To further explore the idea of learning as a social process facilitated by participation in groups or communities, I now turn to an alternative development in learning theory. Lave and Wenger coined the term “communities of practice” to describe the social learning which took place between apprentices as well as between master and apprentice. The concept has since been applied to a wide range of situated learning contexts from the workplace to society at large as this quote from Wenger suggests:

*“Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell: Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”*²⁰²

²⁰¹ Shugerensky, D. (2000) p 5.

²⁰² Wenger, E. (2012a) p1

Wenger's later work explores communities of practice as social learning systems drawing on many of the concepts – emergence, self-organisation, dynamic boundaries and complex relationships - which I review in Chapter 4 as part of my exploration of communities as Complex Adaptive Systems and accounts for my interest in communities of practice within this review of the literature. Whilst the Look Group Network do not fit entirely neatly within the model of a community of practice because of their design by and ongoing relationship with an external organisation (Tate), the Look Groups have developed collective practice through their learning which have created their individual community identities. Wenger's assertion that practice is a self-organising phenomenon which is not determined by, but responds to the environment in which the community is operational, closely mirrors the experiences recorded by the Look Groups:

*A practice has a life of its own. It cannot be subsumed by a design, an institution, or another practice such as management or research. When these structuring elements are present, practice is never simply their output or implementation: it is a response to them—based on active negotiation of meaning. It is in this sense that learning produces a social system and that a practice can be said to be the property of a community.*²⁰³

This argument does not, however, resolve the imbalance of power inherent in such negotiations between community and the public sector environment in which this and a whole range of informal learning takes place. The practices will indeed have a life of their own, but these are not divorced from the complex set of relationships which influence the maintenance or sustainability of that community. The presumption of authority by different agencies operating in the field of informal learning introduces structures which in turn affect the behaviour

²⁰³ Wenger 2012b p 2

of the community. An exploration of the UK informal learning environment is therefore a necessary element of this context setting.

2.2 A Brief History of Adult Learning

Having outlined some of the different interpretations of informal learning present in the adult education literature, I now return to the sphere of public management and policy and provide a brief overview of the history of adult learning focussing in particular on government intervention in the field of adult learning in Britain.

Britain's earliest facilitators of mass informal learning were church missionaries. Initially preachers and gospel storytellers, Protestantism, the birth of the printing press and the translation of the Bible into English demanded a change in the role of the priest from narrator to teacher; empowering communities to read for themselves²⁰⁴. From these origins stem many landmarks on the road to society-wide formal education including Sunday schools and grammar schools.²⁰⁵ Alongside the Church, the tradesmen's guilds played an important role in developing skills and knowledge to support economic growth. The political and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth century were influential in creating new demand for skills for both employment and social and civic life and these were delivered through an increasingly formalised but also self-organising wave of trade unions, co-operatives, community groups and mutual improvement societies²⁰⁶. It was at this time that reading groups first appeared

²⁰⁴ Smith, M.K. (1997) online source

²⁰⁵ <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/history/chapter01.html>

²⁰⁶ UCU (2009) p 7

– a form of self-directed adult learning which remains little changed today and which inspired the Look Group model.²⁰⁷

The explosion of public education opportunity in the nineteenth century saw a diversification in the range of players developing an educational offering and a new interest in adult learning. Whilst adult education continued to have a strong spiritual flavour influenced by the Church, the growth of the British Empire, trade and industrialisation spawned new institutions founded by wealthy patrons. Sir Henry Tate donated his collection of paintings to the nation in 1889 which led to the foundation of the Tate Gallery and John Passmore-Edwards established over 70 public buildings – libraries, galleries and schools including Newlyn Art Gallery, Falmouth Art Gallery and Truro Library in his home county.²⁰⁸ Alongside these symbols of philanthropy, new organisations were emerging which were challenging these traditional hierarchies based on moral or financial superiority. The Mechanics Institute (1803) which grew from working men's libraries and the Women's Co-operative Guild (founded in 1883) are two notable examples.²⁰⁹ The twentieth century saw adult learning transformed in response to the impact of two global conflicts and the ensuing social change. The Workers' Educational Association (WEA), established in 1903, created a national network of adult learning groups, built relationships with universities and became a transformative campaign group. It successfully lobbied the government to raise the school leaving age and for reforms to education provision which became formalised through the 1944

²⁰⁷ Hartley, L. (2001) p18

²⁰⁸ <http://www.passmoreedwards.org.uk/>

²⁰⁹ Smith, M. K. (1997)

Education Act²¹⁰. The twentieth century also saw a role for central government in developing policies for adult education – adding a new layer of political authority to the previous local strategies which had emerged through the creation of elected councils at the end of the nineteenth century²¹¹. In 1917 The Ministry of Reconstruction formed an Adult Education Committee (AEC) whose report of recommendations, published in 1919 has “arguably been the most frequently quoted publication in English about adult learning in the UK”²¹². Stanistreet points to the positioning of the adult education agenda within a broader reconstruction sphere following the horrors of World War 1 as the reasons for its “(i)nspirational language, optimistic tone and comprehensive attention to its brief.”²¹³ As well as expanding the role of the university sector and the WEA and calling for more adult education staff, the report drew explicit links between the adult learning and personal and social development thus positioning adult learning “within the broad spectrum of social and community services”. This period also saw the foundation of many relevant institutions which were to assume para-governmental roles in the development of adult learning. These include the British Institute for Adult Education (1921) which would later become NIACE; the British Broadcasting Corporation (1922) whose original charter proposed a duty to “educate, inform and entertain” the nation; the British Film Institute (1933) and the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (1935) which became the Arts Council of Britain in 1946²¹⁴.

²¹⁰ WEA (2012) pp 6-10

²¹¹ UCU (2009) p 8

²¹² Stanistreet, P. (2011) p24

²¹³ Ibid

²¹⁴ Ibid p23

The absorption of adult learning as a concern of central government and a narrowing of terms of reference to focus on employment related skills, according to Clyne (2009) account for the failure to “enable the broad range of adult learning to be addressed as an integrated whole”²¹⁵ and for the ensuing cycles of rhetoric and inaction in which informal (non-vocational) learning was seen as valuable but continued to take a back seat in terms of development. The 1950s and 1960s are highlighted in particular as a period of great “disappointment” with the government failing to recognise the need for retraining men returning from service, to capitalise on basic skills programmes run by the armed services and respond to women’s evolving role in society and the workplace. The work of the Russell Committee in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s made welcome recommendations to value all forms of adult learning for their potential to improve the quality of life at both an individual and community level²¹⁶ but further disappointment followed when the administration in power and successive governments failed to recognise this broad spectrum of adult learning opportunities. High unemployment in the 1970s and 1980s, the growth of the higher education sector in the 1990s and the high speed of technological change and globalisation throughout the latter part of the 20th and early 21st century have all served to put informal, non-vocational learning at the bottom of a long list of other educational and training priorities to meet the needs of the economy. These range from meeting basic needs such as literacy, numeracy and English and a growing demand for IT skills to enable employers and retailers alike to access computer and internet literate markets. The 2009 Learning Revolution, which funded the Look Group

²¹⁵ Clyne, P.(2009) p5

²¹⁶ Ibid p 11

Project (see Appendix 1) stands out as a distinctive piece of policy making for its emphasis on learning for enjoyment and for its own intrinsic value. The timing of the policy at the end of an administration and the contradictions in its interpretation of informality already presented may unfortunately see it confined to the category of rhetoric in terms of its lasting legacy.

Alongside these direct adult learning policy developments, it is important for this study to briefly consider the role of the art gallery in adult education. These institutions fall outside the typical administrative environments for adult learning – the university, further education institution, technical college – but are nevertheless observed as being motivated towards or leading the development of learning opportunities for adults through the work of devolved government agencies, in particular the Arts Council. The reorganisation of local government in the 1970s and 1980's appears to play a role in pushing some galleries and art museums towards a more explicit role in education and the 1979 creation of an education post in the visual art department of the Arts Council, followed by the 1983 policy statement on education are also key events in the development of museum and gallery education. Within a decade the National Association for Gallery Education (NAGE) had been formed to support gallery educators²¹⁷. Extrapolating a motivation to support gallery education as part of the non-vocational, wellbeing and quality of life agenda is difficult as many of these initiatives described were associated with the education of children. The early 1980s also saw the publication of the Gulbenkian Foundation's *The Art in Schools Report* which responded to "the

²¹⁷ Pringle, E. (2006) online source

prevailing political emphasis on science and technology”²¹⁸ and the marginalising of art as a core subject in schools. The report highlighted an important role for galleries in supporting schools in ensuring that the arts continued to contribute to the development of society through education:

*We maintain that a positive concern with the enrichment of our public life through the practice and appreciation of the arts would convey immeasurable benefits on our society.*²¹⁹

The report recognised that schools were not the only places of learning and that adults too both needed and wanted to access different forms of artistic practice and appreciation throughout their lives. Continuing education, adult education, libraries, galleries, arts centres and recreation and leisure venues would all play a role in promoting lifelong opportunities for learning about the arts.

The professionalisation of the role of gallery educator through bodies such as NAGE (now Engage) and the Arts Council and the growth of teams within major galleries such as Tate, with their network of politically and financially powerful advocates, has seen education become a core function of galleries and art museums which attract significant funds through major donations and bids to competitive public funding programmes. In 2011 Tate Modern opened a suite of new learning spaces funded by the Clore Duffield Foundation²²⁰. The Foundation is one of the biggest charitable foundations in the UK and forty-two “Clore” studios, workshops and learning spaces are to be found in museums and galleries all over the UK²²¹. Galleries as places of art education are thus

²¹⁸ Robinson, K. (1983) p.xiv

²¹⁹ Ibid p 141

²²⁰ <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/press-office/press-releases/new-learning-spaces-open-tate-modern>

²²¹ <http://www.cloreduffield.org.uk/press/24.3.11%20Donations%20Press%20Release.pdf>

seen to operate under different spheres of influence with private investment helping to ensure gaps in public provision do not limit the growth of the arts institution.

Though it appears under different labels – adult education, lifelong learning, informal learning, non-formal learning, family and community learning - and fulfils different functions for different agencies, this rapid tour of landmark institutions and events in history shows adult learning to be inextricably woven into the fabric of social and economic political decision making. Technological developments, conflict and political revolution loom large historically as both catalysts for and the products of learning outside of formal education settings. Memory and awareness of these events, on the part of policy makers, may account for the peaks in interest around the benefits of informal learning and the troughs of inactivity as more pressing issues take preference. Whilst it was not my intention to present an exhaustive history or policy analysis relating to informal, non-vocational learning, the confusing array of different adult learning categories would in any case make this challenging and accounts for the limited material on this topic within the literature researched. My overwhelming impression is of a policy area which is dominated by positive rhetoric about the benefits of non-vocational, informal learning but which must rely on the private and voluntary sector to deliver in the face of competing social and economic needs.

Section 3: Informal Learning and the Sustainable Community: recent developments

This final section attempts to bring together the two policy fields already explored and seek out recent developments in informal learning policy which contribute to sustainable communities. To refocus the frame of study after the more general histories presented in Sections 1 and 2, I have selected two contrasting government strategies within the five year period of the research project 2009 – 2014: Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) strategies promoted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Labour administration, and the Coalition policy *Investing in Skills for Sustainable Growth*. These policies are not perfectly aligned with the now seemingly redundant government definition of the sustainable community but both recognise the importance of community as a democratic unit through which transformation – social, economic and environmental - can be effected.

3.1 Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

ESD is a global movement of educators working to embed the principles of sustainable development into the worldwide education system. The UK Sustainable Development Education Network defined ESD as “(t)he process of acquiring the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to build local and global societies that are just, equitable and living within the environmental limits of our planet, both now and in the future”²²² The movement gained unity and momentum when UNESCO designated the years 2005-2014 as the United

²²² Quoted on NIACE website: <http://www.niace.org.uk/sustainable-development> accessed 30/08/14

Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) ²²³. With the 2004 publication of the Egan Review in response to the Sustainable Communities Plan (2003) learning and skills had already been given a lead role in community sustainability. From 2005 the involvement of the UK National Commission for UNESCO working with the Labour administration saw a more comprehensive strategy of supporting different government departments and education institutions in integrating ESD across formal, non-formal and informal education through the ESD co-ordinating group.²²⁴ Achievements highlighted in a 2010 report include the growth of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) Sustainable Schools programme; the production of the Learning and Skills Council's first sustainability strategy embracing curriculum and the "Acting on CO₂" awareness campaign²²⁵, which was the product of multi-departmental collaboration. The report acknowledges throughout that whilst progress had been made, more action would be needed to push forward the ambitions of the ESD movement. In adult education progress was described as "patchy" with community learning in particular highlighted as being in the "earlier stages of development"²²⁶. The tone of the March 2013 report, *Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the UK – Current status, best practice and opportunities for the future* is sombre by comparison. The effect of a change in government and the focus on the economy, in the light of worldwide recession, was very evident. Dividing the UK into its constituent nations, the report showed that in England government interest and emphasis on sustainable development had diminished:

²²³ <http://www.unescobkk.org/index.php?id=961>

²²⁴ United Kingdom National Commission for UNESCO (2010) p7

²²⁵ DEFRA (2007) *Tackling Climate Change*

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/218799/tackling-climate-change.pdf

²²⁶ *Ibid* p 8

*This reduced government focus on sustainable development has resulted in increased uncertainties amongst educational institutions and practitioners about how much emphasis to place on sustainability within teaching and learning. Commitment on the ground is strong, though rarely part of mainstream practice.*²²⁷

A strong theme throughout the later report was the lack of connectivity. Sustainable Development was seen as the responsibility of different government departments working in partnership but this approach did not work in practice, leading the authors to recommend an overarching sustainable development strategy²²⁸. The report also noted the lack of connectivity between different education sectors. It saw opportunity in developing links between university researchers and community learning programmes, as exemplified by research partnerships involving the Transitions Town movement²²⁹ to support bottom-up innovation.

The National Commission will continue to report on the impact of DESD until 2021 but it has admitted that the evidence collected to date “indicates a rather ill-focused and half-hearted awareness campaign leading to a patchy impact.”²³⁰ Disappointingly, the Commission’s future work will focus on building on and promoting existing successes where ESD has become part of mainstream education rather than expanding into those areas like non-vocational learning where their previous reports suggested the movement could be effective.

From this attempt to integrate a broad interpretation of sustainability learning across multiple areas of government activity, I now turn to an adult learning policy focussed on economic growth to look for evidence of support for community sustainability.

²²⁷ UK National Commission for UNESCO 2013 p17

²²⁸ Ibid p22

²²⁹ Ibid p19

²³⁰ Ibid p 22-3

3.2 Skills for Sustainable Growth

The Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2010 Strategy Document *Investing in Skills for Sustainable Growth* put forward a goal of achieving “a truly lifelong approach to learning, nurturing sustainable economic growth and social renewal” against a backdrop of reduced funding following the 2010 spending review. With spending on adult learning predicted to fall by 25% between 2010 and 2015²³¹, the strategy laid out priorities for funding – young people, literacy and numeracy courses and adults moving from welfare to work. Sustainability was clearly labelled as economic growth; searching for initiatives that would have an impact on the natural environment retrieve only terms like “fiscal climate” and “work environment”. The document did however acknowledge the potential contribution which informal learning can make in building the Big Society. Whilst acknowledging the benefits which come from the learning process, the emphasis was on skills acquisition:

*Skills are an asset of our cultural and community life. They enable people to play a full part in society, making it more cohesive, more environmentally-friendly, more tolerant and more engaged. The benefits to social cohesion include reduced crime, greater civic engagement, better health and more socially tolerant attitudes towards minority groups. The process of learning also has a strong positive impact on mental health and well-being, helping people cope better with the stresses of daily life as well as social change.*²³²

Informal learning is seen very much as a progression route helping those who may have had poor experiences of the formal education system to return to learning²³³ or to find ways to engage the disinterested or anxious in using essential technology – such as the 9.2 million adults (18% of population) who

²³¹ BIS 2010 p4

²³² Ibid p 30

²³³ Ibid p31

have never used the internet²³⁴. This is an integrated adult learning strategy which includes recommendations for further education so the motivations for linking informal to formal learning are logistical and about creating a market for further education as well as contributing to sustainable economic growth.

The themes of social justice and focussing resources on those in greatest need surface throughout the report, presumably as a means to defend the reduction in spending on adult learning. The message throughout is that funding will be prioritised “for learners with very low levels of skills or the disadvantaged”. Very low skills are defined as poor literacy and numeracy but the idea of disadvantage is not expanded. Young people are highlighted as one priority group in response to the disproportionate impact which the recession has had on youth unemployment and the fact that “one in seven” young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET)²³⁵. NIACE’s response to the consultation prior to the publishing of the 2010 strategy recognised this deficiency in defining and prioritising disadvantaged groups. The organisation called for BIS to:

respond to a changing demographic profile by rebalancing policy to ensure that a

focus on the skills of first-time entrants to the labour market is matched by a more balanced investment in learning throughout life;

and to:

better acknowledge that the social and economic purposes of education are indivisible and that the public investment in adult skills needs to reflect this.

²³⁴ ONS 2010 quoted in BIS 2010 p37

²³⁵ BIS 2010 p 3

The 2011 Review of Adult Informal Learning which followed the 2010 strategy gave greater definition to people categorised as disadvantaged which acknowledged a greater importance for the social benefit which informal learning contributes. Also, in the context of the Look Group which operates in a rural region, there was a recognition that geography also contributes to social and economic disadvantage:

unemployed people, offenders and their families, older people, those in care settings and people with disabilities. We are also keen to ensure that opportunities are open to those living in rural communities, who may face particular difficulties – including transport difficulties – in locating and accessing suitable provision”²³⁶

Another criticism by NIACE was the complexity of the intervention:

Overall, Skills for Sustainable Growth appears still to invite the design of well-meant but complex interventions which risk stifling rather than empowering teachers and trainers and mistrusts the professional abilities of further education providers to determine their own curriculum offer and make innovative responses to local economic and social needs.²³⁷

This is also particularly relevant to the Look Group project which, as the results from both the Tate Interviews and the Look Group focus groups indicate, unnecessary structure or direction can inhibit the creativity which can sustain both learning itself and the community participating in the activity. The criticism is also reminiscent of those by Stott and Coote (see Section 1.4) in relation to the Big Society. Whilst *Skills for Sustainable Growth* looks to support and build the Big Society, its top-down approach and narrow interpretation of “sustainable” does not create the necessary conditions to empower communities to make decisions and take responsibility for themselves.

Returning to the context in which the concept sustainable community was created – the Brundtland report which advocated a three-pronged approach to

²³⁶ BIS, 2011 p4

²³⁷ NIACE 2010 p 4

sustainable development through the consideration of environmental, social and economic concerns, *Skills for Sustainable Growth* is not clearly aligned with this approach and cannot thus be seen as learning policies which contribute to conditions for sustainable communities. A broad sense of community sustainability in which the natural environment is both protected and seen as an asset for community life is likely to only happen by accident rather than intent. Whilst accepting NIACE's criticism that complex interventions by government add unnecessary structure which inhibits the creativity of professionals to engage with learners, without more explicit recognition of the natural environment in relation to the development of a community skills base, I can envisage new forms of disadvantage emerging as environmental degradation and climate change leave some communities with reduced public services. It misses the opportunity also to see a progression from informal learning not just to the employment market but to the building of the Big Society; capitalising on interests like gardening or art appreciation and progressing individuals towards important skills like sustainable food management and voluntary work in museums or galleries.

Embedding ESD across government is essentially another top-down government initiative. Its United Nations backing gives it the connectivity to global debates and action on sustainable development and climate change. It also embraces a full appreciation of the need to balance social, economic and environmental objectives in order to achieve sustainable development and the importance of different forms of learning in achieving citizen awareness of these issues from school children to adults learning in the workplace. The approach, however, is time-consuming and difficult to co-ordinate leaving it open to

changes in government or policy. The scaling back of the work of the Commission to focus on mainstream education is disappointing as, like *Skills for Sustainable Growth*, it misses the opportunity to push a bottom up agenda which responds to communities' passions and interests and links to the Big Society empowering them to deliver services including community learning.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has explored two distinct but overlapping policy areas: sustainable community policy and adult learning policy. The purpose was to provide a political context for the Look Group Network and account for my own assumption, and those laid out in the Learning Revolution, that learning could contribute significantly in creating the conditions for community sustainability. The sustainable community policy review revealed a method rooted in the idea of communities of place – a spatial and construction approach. The review of adult learning revealed that the community was an important tool through which to engage with learners, though these communities could also be defined by interest. This is backed up by the theory with Wenger's Communities of Practice also placing an emphasis on the community as a place of learning.

Throughout the chapter, I have hinted that sustainability and learning may share a conceptual origin which may account for their sharing the same policy aspirations and for government attempts to integrate their implementation. Both sustainability and learning are dynamic processes of change which respond to a constantly evolving environment. They are processes of human survival for which there is no agreed end or finishing position. Global society can no more

agree a description or model of a sustainable community than it can agree what constitutes a sufficient or necessary education. Learning and sustainable development policy spheres, my conclusion will identify, are non-linear, self-organising systems through which the following of simple rules at a micro level can create unpredictable and disproportionate results.

Learning and sustainability are also both areas in which government intervention is deemed necessary but which often fail to create the right conditions in which the better informed local and bottom-up solutions can develop and flourish. It is challenging for governments to get the right balance of structure and definition. The potential for community, as a unit of democracy and a tool for government in promoting learning for sustainability, lies in creating ways and places to learn which can respond to the interests of a small population at a given time. These learning programmes and spaces need to flex and change in tune with community interests to avoid fragmentation. Government policy seems to recognise the importance of the bottom up approach but frequently puts in place too many and too complex measures to engender real empowerment. The Ebb and Flow cycle, which is introduced in the Methodology chapter which follows, is an attempt to model the circular processes of participation evident from different manifestations of community life including the informal learning experiences as theorised in this chapter and reported by the Look Group members. It is also presented as a response to the general trend towards top-down community initiatives by providing a means to understand more generally the micro dynamic conditions which contribute to group sustainability. A third contribution is the understanding of a community as a complex adaptive system in which sustainability is interpreted as survival.

This perspective removes the idea of a sustainable community from the political concepts presented here. Learning – in the three forms presented in this chapter: self-directed, incidental and tacit - are part of an essential process within the cycle, providing a focus around which networks, partnerships and trust can form.

Chapter 4 – Research Methodology

Chapter Introduction

My starting point in designing and carrying out the qualitative research has been to consider a sustainable community as a complex social system which is able to self-organise and respond to shifts in the environment by adaptation. The data collection has examined to what degree the communities created by the Look Group project display these properties and whether there is consensus that these properties of complex adaptive systems correspond with contemporary visions of the sustainable community.

This chapter outlines the approach to the design of the research project. It is organised into four sections. In section 1, I set out my three central research questions. In section 2 I describe the overarching methodology and additional research design considerations including the project legacy/audience. In section 3, I describe the data collection methods selected and in section 4, I introduce the methods applied to the analysis of data.

Section 1 - Research Questions

The primary research question for this study is:

What are the conditions which support the sustainability of the Look groups?

By conditions I am referring to a set of necessary or sufficient circumstances (events, states, properties, relationships) which can be observed in each of the surviving Look Groups and which the research participants identified as part of

a general discussion about community sustainability. As Chapter 2 has previously stated, the conditions which the Complexity Theory literature identifies as key to the sustainability of the system are the connectivity and interdependence of agents within the system and between the system and its environment; and non-linear dynamics. These conditions enable adaptation, self-organisation and emergence. My analysis of the data (Part 3) demonstrates how through the presence of these conditions, the Look Groups are able to adapt to changes, negotiate forms of authority and formality and maintain a regular programme of meeting which brings individual and collective benefits.

The research challenges the macro understandings and models of sustainability prevalent in public policy and their suitability in exploring and understanding the micro dynamics of community sustainability. The second research question demands reflection on the methodology selected for this study and the analysis of the results from the seven case studies:

How does the research contribute to the micro understanding of community sustainability?

Here the Ebb and Flow cycle, generated through the data, points to five ordered stages of social interactions through which communities coalesce and dissipate.

The research project will contribute to a growing body of research which uses a complexity approach to understanding relationships and phenomena in the public sphere. Whilst complexity has been applied to a wide variety of contexts from organisation dynamics (Mitleton Kelly 2003; Stacey, 2003); community health (Durie and Wyatt, 2007); education (Sumara and Davis, 2009;

Zellermayer and Margolin, 2005); and policy processes (Eppel, Matheson & Walton, 2011) there remains a lack of empirical studies which apply complexity theory in the analysis of social phenomena (Gatrell, 2005). My third research question makes explicit this ambition to test the applicability of Complexity Theory to the study of communities:

To what extent does Complexity Theory provide a means for developing a theoretical understanding of sustainable community dynamics and of the dynamics of successfully transferring these conditions to other communities?

In my exploration of Complex Adaptive Systems, I have examined the processes and behaviours of complex systems and reviewed the literature for examples of how these have been observed or hypothesised in relation to human communities. This has involved an examination of the role of metaphor and the degree to which research into social systems relies on models. The nature of the study has also allowed for some participant reflections on the usefulness of Complexity metaphors. This question demands a critical reflection on the appropriateness and value of Complexity Theory in advancing understanding of sustainable communities.

Section 2) Research methodology – Participant Observation

Understanding the micro dynamics of the Look Groups required the application of a methodology which went beyond simply questioning and recording. Immersion in the experience and observing the workings of the meetings from different perspectives was needed. This led to the exploration of Participant Observation as an overarching methodological approach and the adoption of

associated data collection methods including interviews, focus groups, negotiated feedback and keeping a research journal of observations. With a view to interrogating the data from a Complexity perspective and understanding myself as part of the system under scrutiny, an emphasis on reflexivity in research was also important.

2.1 Participant Observation

Participant observation finds its roots in cultural anthropology and the term is often used interchangeably with ethnography and even fieldwork²³⁸. The approach was originally developed to allow researchers to document the lived experiences, rituals, institutions and beliefs of groups and communities from different cultures. Margaret Mead's ethnography (1954), in which she immersed herself in Samoan culture for an extended period of time²³⁹, is frequently cited as a classic case of participant observation²⁴⁰. It is now used widely throughout the social sciences as a strategy for collecting data relating to human behaviour in its natural context. In early studies like Mead's, the emphasis of participant observation was on the outsider looking in and offered a deeper understanding of what was being studied than relying solely on participants' explanations of what they do and why they do it. As Hammersley suggests, "to rely on what people say about what they believe and do, without also observing what they do, is to neglect the complex relationship between attitudes and behaviour"²⁴¹. This insider-outsider distinction and the suppression of the ethnographer's first-hand experiences in the field was seen as a means to ensure scientific results, though as George Devereux observed these articles tended to "smell of the

²³⁸ Halperin, S and Heath, O. (2012) p 288

²³⁹ Mead, M. (1954)

²⁴⁰ Burnham et al (2008) p 265

²⁴¹ Hammersley, M. (1990) p 597.

morgue and (be) almost irrelevant in terms of living reality”.²⁴² Tedlock documents a historical pathway in anthropological research from the discrediting or discouragement of narrative, subjectivity, confessional, personal anecdote or lived experience towards the self-representation of the observer within a narrative which makes a virtue of descriptions of the interactions between observer and their subjects²⁴³. The reasons for this shift include the “general climate of epistemological doubt” prevalent in today’s social sciences coupled with global societal changes which have seen a blurring of the observer and observed categories and an emphasis on research as action oriented. Tedlock urges researchers to bring their knowledge and experience from outside of the field of enquiry into the research narrative in order to build connections between narrow academic disciplines and wider cultural experiences. I explore further the idea of accounting for self in section 2.2.1.

As well as the challenges of defining the relationship between the observer and the observed in obtaining “scientific” results, the literature also points to the idea that participant observation studies have limited external validity. The rich, textual “thick descriptions”²⁴⁴ produced through the approach may not be generalised to other phenomena, contexts or communities. But the use of participant observation to either generate or apply theory is possible. A deductive study with particular relevance to this project is Eliasoph’s 1997 ethnography of political apathy in the US which tested Noelle-Neumann’s “spiral

²⁴² Devereux, G. (1967) p 97

²⁴³ Tedlock, B. (1991) p 72

²⁴⁴ Halperin, & Heath p. 290

of silence” theory through participant observation within public and private community contexts²⁴⁵.

Participant observation presents numerous trade-offs for the researcher. Immersion within the experience leaves the observer at risk of creating subjective or biased descriptions which may serve no place in the development or testing of theory. The approach places great responsibility on the researcher’s ability to negotiate access to the members of the community with key knowledge, to get the right balance between participation and observation²⁴⁶ and to make decisions about the relative importance of different behaviours or observed²⁴⁷. There are also numerous ethical concerns about the potential harm the communities under observation may experience through both the process of participant observation and through the publication of results.²⁴⁸ It remains, however, a methodology with a growing following across the social sciences because of its effectiveness in generating reliable evidence of actual day-to-day activity compared to what participants might report they do through other methods such as a survey or post-activity interview. Its recognition as a means to document and examine previously unreported or difficult to define phenomena held particular appeal in the consideration of participant observation as the central methodology for this study.

²⁴⁵ Ibid p 291

²⁴⁶ De Walt and De Walt (1998) p 291

²⁴⁷ Burnham et al p 280

²⁴⁸ De Walt and De Walt p 273

2.2 Other methodological concerns

2.2.1 Reflexivity - Accounting for 'Self' in a self-organising system

In a complex adaptive system, causality is non-linear, meaning that a small change to one of the elements could have a disproportionately large impact on the rest of the system. As one of those elements in the system is me – as a researcher entering the system, as someone who helped set up the Look Group project and as a networked resident of a small population region - I need to be sensitive to and account for the impact that my values, experiences and indeed expectations as an early career researcher could have on the system. With permeable boundaries that are socially constructed there is no standard sense of either “inside” or “outside” of the system and hence no position of objectivity for the researcher. Building reflexivity into the research methodology is one way to ensure accountability and reduce bias. Also, in keeping with the Participant Observation methodology, reflexivity helps to determine and define the relationship between the participant and the observer. Ledwith and Springett describe this process as becoming critically reflexive to gain greater insight from the research process. “Inner criticality is in symbiotic relationship with our outer perceptions, continually questioning and exploring meanings, possibilities and purpose in relation to life experience”²⁴⁹. I followed their advice to develop the inner process through a research journal, excerpts from which are used to illustrate phenomena or add detail to experiences described by the participants.

²⁴⁹ Ledwith, M. & Springett, J. (2010) pp 215-6

2.2.3 Iterative and inductive

Participant Observation, as my summary of the literature has surmised can be both inductive and deductive. My approach of immersing myself within the Look Group Network and reflecting on my observations of their experiences was inductive; growing theory from the data. However, with one of my research questions explicitly seeking to explore the extent to which Complexity Theory can be a useful tool in the analysis of sustainable community dynamics, the research contained both inductive and deductive reasoning processes. An iterative approach to the data collection and analysis allowed for cycles of participating, reflecting, writing, revisiting the participants, listening to transcripts and reflecting again on what messages were surfacing with a view to acknowledging the preconceptions I bore and “to minimize the effect of these, or to work with them as advantages”²⁵⁰ The Spiral Model in Figure 3 assists in illustrating this process. In considering what defence might be presented towards an approach that could be accused of ‘going round in circles’ I was particularly buoyed by another extract from O’Reilly’s work which argues that “(e)thnography moves steadily forward, yet forward and back at the same time. Iterative implies both a spiral and a straight line, a loop and a tail.”²⁵¹ Plotting a cyclical route through the research design explicitly acknowledged the non-linear dynamic processes I expected to find in complex adaptive systems. I envisage this process using the following metaphor: if I had set off from A to B along one path my observations of the environment would have been far more limited than a journey which took a circular route taking in views of every aspect of both destinations.

²⁵⁰ O’Reilly, K. online resource no date given <http://karenoreilly.wordpress.com/what-is-ethnography/iterative-inductive-research/>

²⁵¹ O’Reilly, K. (2012) p 30

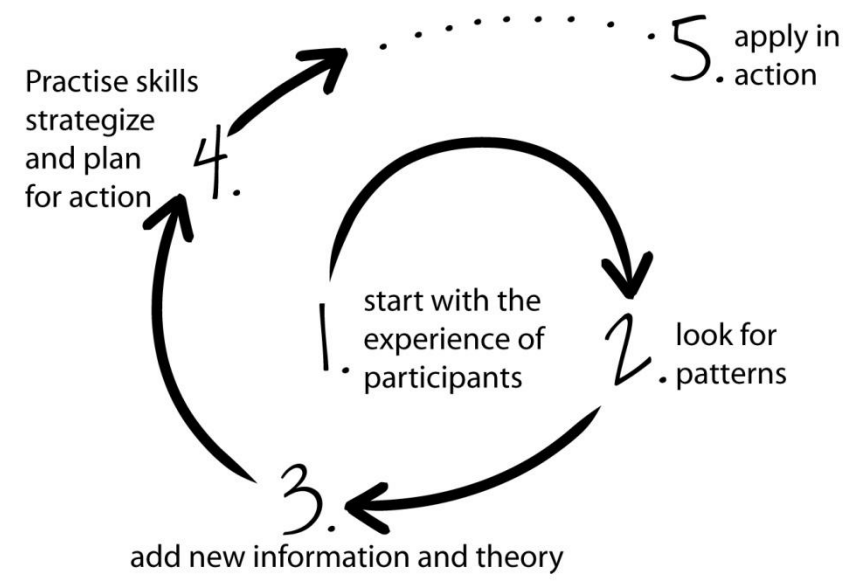


Fig.3 The Spiral Model of Popular Education²⁵²

2.2.4 Legacy/Audience for the research

In keeping with the aims of the European Social Fund Studentship supporting my research, I wanted to ensure that local knowledge and networks were utilised well and that the final product – my thesis - be accessible to a non-academic audience. I want my research participants to be able to read and understand how their experiences helped to shape the design of the project and how this kind of empirical study will in turn contribute to broader debates about the sustainable community. This thinking has influenced the way in which the research is presented – the language, using of diagrams and other models – and also my decision to write in the first person in order to acknowledge my personal relationship with the research subject. A number of participatory research projects quoted in the literature discuss the ways in which participation

²⁵² PERC (2002) p 4

can create the conditions for critical self-representation and the researchers' realisation that the most important audience for the research were the participants themselves (Cahill et al 2004, Rios-Moore et al 2004 quoted in Cahill and Torre 2007). Shared identity and voice are at the heart of a strong and sustainable community and can be interpreted as the emergent properties of dynamic interactions which the Look Group network facilitates. As part of the negotiated feedback sessions and the research and networking event in the final stages of the data collection, I tried to tap into the skills and knowledge the groups have developed through their experiences as discussion facilitators to generate discourse around the topic of collective identity and representation. This approach tried again to challenge the traditional power dynamic between researcher and researched and has provided opportunities to explore different senses of learning in the complex adaptive system: cognition relating to the generation and transmission of knowledge and adaptation – learning from the environment to create the conditions for transformation.

I wish to make it clear that I would not anticipate any of the research participants reading this thesis from end to end. Subsequent articles and presentations should provide accessible routes into the research. But the style of presentation throughout the thesis acknowledges that public funding was invested in the tangible output of a completed research project which would bring benefits to communities in an underperforming region of Europe and that the entirety of the research should be accessible to a audience wider than academic colleagues.

Section 3 - Data Collection Methods

3.1 Overview

The research fieldwork was conducted between November 2011 and July 2013 and used hallmark methods of Participant Observation - observing and immersion in the Look Group communities, focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and an ongoing dialogue with all the selected groups of learners - as the main data collection tools. Before data collection commenced I presented a proposal to the University of Exeter's College of Social Sciences and International Studies (hereafter SSIS) Ethics Committee to seek approval for my plans. Ethical consent was requested using an information sheet which described the key terms of reference, identified the research funder and my previous connection to Tate St Ives and explained how the data would be used and securely stored. All interviews and group discussions were audio recorded and fully transcribed.

3.2 Focus groups

I conducted focus group discussions with five different Look Groups. I used this method of data collection to gather opinion and learn about the experience of the groups of learners. The Look Group project established 21 groups across Cornwall in 2009 but by 2011 when I was planning my fieldwork, this total had been reduced to 15. It had been my intention to visit all the groups but various factors including resources, time and the logistics of visiting and re-visiting groups that were dispersed across Cornwall led me to re-appraise my approach and build a more in-depth research relationship with five of the groups. They

were selected using a combination of maximum variation and chain sampling strategies. I wanted to see the effects of variation through the different locations across Cornwall, types of venues being used, meeting structure and group membership. I was able to use information collected from the earlier visits to make decisions about which other groups to include in the project.

In some senses focus group is an inaccurate way to describe the method of research employed. Halperin and Heath define a focus group as a type of interview in which “people (are) selected because they are related to some phenomenon of interest”²⁵³ In industry, the selection of focus group members who represent particular sections of society for marketing and product development has become a major concern. With the case study in hand, the people related to the “phenomenon of interest” are Look Group members and the most practical way to both observe and explore their experiences was through establishing a dialogue with the group, attending their meetings and posing my questions. To have attempted to select a representative group from amongst the network membership would, I believe, have been very challenging. Finding a venue that members from all over Cornwall were happy to travel to and a date to meet, for example, would have been difficult but the greatest challenge would have been understanding what constituted a representative sample without having met any of the members. The selection issue aside, my rationale for persisting in the use of the term focus group is a hint in the political research methods literature that a focus group is about more than the individual opinions expressed and that the “explicit use of group interaction as research

²⁵³ Halperin, S. & Heath, O. (2012) p 255

data” is a defining characteristic²⁵⁴. From a Complexity perspective the opportunity to explore the relationships between the group members and between members and their wider community would reveal important systems dynamics that individual interviews could not and the focus group helped to facilitate that exploration of relationships.

In all cases, the co-ordinator was asked to secure democratically agreed permission for me to attend their scheduled Look Group meeting and to circulate information about my research project. This forewarning may have resulted in certain participants deliberately opting in to the study whilst others intentionally stayed away from the meeting on that occasion but at least gave the option for members to make an informed decision. I visited the group in their usual environment and used a semi-structured schedule of questions to explore first the experiences of the groups as part of the Look Group project and secondly their more general views on community sustainability. The Look Groups’ utilisation of informal facilitation methods was of interest as it provided evidence of how the groups made use of early training given by Tate St Ives and the impact on group dynamic and behaviours such as co-operation and negotiation. The participants’ familiarity with and confidence using questioning techniques also assisted my adoption of an informal moderator style. In most of the groups once a question had been posed, the group managed the discussion with very little direction, ensuring everyone contributed to the topic and requesting clarification from each other where needed. This allowed a more natural kind of data to be collected. There were exceptions, for example where the group dynamic and Look Group meeting structure relied on a facilitator

²⁵⁴ Kitzingner, J. quoted in Burnham et al (2008) p 128

prompting each member to contribute. These exceptions are flagged up as they arose in the sub-cases which are reported in Appendix 3.

3.3 Observation and participation

Observation of the learning activity itself was crucial to understanding the conditions for success. With four of the groups, after completing my focus group questions, I then stayed to observe and participate in the Look Group meeting. I found that themes from our discussion about sustainability and learning experience recurred in the subsequent discussion about art indicating that the groups were very adept at reflecting on and making use of new discussion threads. The single group who requested that I take part in their usual art discussions first, before posing my research questions, behaved quite differently and this difference in the influence of the researcher on the system will be explored in the findings in Chapters 5 and 6. I will also reflect on the differences in behaviour of the participants according to my visibility in conducting observations. My very first encounter with the Look Group Network was conducting slightly more covert observations at a meeting of all the Look Groups and this gave me access to a different range of views about the management of the Look Group Network and of interaction between the different groups. This observation is also significant because the event and the discussions were referenced by many of the groups in my subsequent visits. In all cases I had permission to be an observer and made notes rather than recordings.

3.4 Semi-structured elite interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with six individuals who represented the partner organisations who directed, organised and funded the Look Group project. Four interviewees were staff (permanent and contracted) from Tate St Ives and two were senior managers at Cornwall Council. The purpose of this series of interviews was to understand and map out critical relations between the organisations which might account for or create conditions to support sustainable behaviour. For each interview I posed a number of the same open questions relating to the role of the individual within their organisation and their role in the project; If a response was either particularly interesting or if little information was imparted I would then pose supplementary tailored questions to explore their responses further. The method has proved particularly useful for gaining understanding of public sector attitudes to sustainable community rhetoric and strategies as individual agents are generally time-poor and find this a more satisfactory way to engage with the study than, for example, a survey. The results (Appendix 2) revealed two organisations working within a challenging political and economic environment with shared aspirations for positive change in Cornwall but with a different set of external influencers. These differences inevitably presented challenges to the way in which the project developed and caused the ultimate fragmentation and end of the partnership.

3.5 Social Media communication

To develop the outer process of consciousness I experimented with different techniques to continue dialogue and reflection with the Look Groups. I attempted to use the Ning social media site which was set up with the original

project grant to contact and communicate with the groups with mixed results. Using the Ning as a means to connect the different groups has caused reactions from the Look Groups ranging from bewilderment to anger. My own experiences with the Ning were similarly frustrating as it was badly designed and not as flexible or fun to use as generic social media applications like Facebook. My interactions were very limited in number due to the very small number of Look Group members using the Ning but I still regard the experimentation as significant and the analysis of the data includes some reflections on this method of communication with the research participants.

3.6 Negotiated feedback

Having completed the first stage of research, I returned to the groups between February and June 2013 to conduct negotiated feedback sessions. The purpose of these discussions was to encourage further reflection on the themes identified and on the representation of the Look Group identity(s). I had received widespread interest from all the groups in a return visit, but as with our first introductory meetings, I sought permission through the group co-ordinators in advance. I prepared in advance a handout/presentation of quotes from the original transcripts grouped around the questions I had posed. At this stage, each Look Group only viewed the quotations collected from their own group and without any thematic analysis – I simply explained that the quotes were representative of the range of views expressed at the first meeting and then invited comments and discussion on each group of quotations. I used open ended questions such as: “What do people think about those views?” “What else would people like to add?” With every group I re-visited there were

different members in attendance at the time of the negotiated feedback. Some people had been members at the time of my first visit and others had been recruited since. As with the original meetings, I had no control or prior knowledge of who would be in attendance. The appearance of new or different members presented an opportunity to gather additional views and to learn about how particular issues such as recruitment of new members might have changed over time. My concern with the validity of the data collected from the negotiated feedback sessions was that new or different members were being asked to comment on excerpts from the previous session and this might in some way direct or introduce bias to their responses. Whilst this remains an appropriate concern, the data collected definitely enriched the overall messages from the Look Group Network as a whole. Themes which arose in one group, for example, surfaced in other groups only during the negotiated feedback sessions along with expressions and phrases which I had not made reference to in the handouts/presentation but which had been used by their fellow members at the previous session.

Formal negotiated feedback was not conducted with the interviewees. This was mainly due to their limited available time. All the interviewees were also invited to participate in the Research and Networking Day. Only one respondent was available to attend.

3.7 Research and Networking day

The iterative and reflective nature of the research project presented a huge opportunity to respond to some of the themes and issues raised and try to effect some positive change on behalf of the Look Group Network. My visits to the

groups revealed a sense of frustration that Tate St Ives appeared to have forgotten about them and that they were trying to sustain the vision of the project on their own. My original plan had been to attempt some kind of intervention around the Ning – perhaps trying to encourage increased communication between groups using the platform or promoting feedback to Tate St Ives that would lead to improvements - but with such little enthusiasm for the platform amongst members and so few users this seemed like a vast task. It struck me that from a Complexity perspective I would already have had an impact on the network purely by turning up and expressing an interest in the experiences of the Look Group members and that I would like to explore what that impact might have been. Furthermore, throughout the visits to the groups, the face to face contact was highlighted by members as being one of the main conditions to group sustainability. From these converging viewpoints I began making plans for a research and networking event open to all of the groups that would promote reflection and collective action.

An account of the event is included as Appendix 4.

3.8 Negative case

The data collection processes described in the previous sections documents the experiences of Look Groups in which the informal learning activity had been sustained over the three and a half years between the project inception and the completion of my fieldwork (November 2009 – July 2013). To understand the relevance and importance of the conditions which helped to sustain these groups it was necessary to also investigate at least one case in which sustainability had not been achieved. Two groups were identified through discussions with the Learning Team at Tate St Ives: Groups 6 and 7. As the

groups had stopped meeting, and in some cases members had moved away from the area, it was not possible to organise a focus group style discussion. Archive data from Tate St Ives including e mail correspondence and questionnaires were analysed and an in-depth interview with a member from Group 7 gathered to enrich the accounts.

Section 4 – Data Analysis

4.1 Qualitative Thematic Analysis

The first phase of analysis began with a line-by-line coding of the transcriptions. This process made me appreciate how rich the data was and how much I could learn about the individual and group experiences of learning and community life. It also helped to differentiate threads of meaning within the group discussions that were misleading, for example discussions which the participants might have described as consensus actually turned out to be founded on fundamentally opposing viewpoints but shrouded in the noises of agreement. Charmaz (2006:55) notes this as a major benefit of line-by-line coding:

You make fundamental processes explicit, render hidden assumptions visible and give participants new insight.

Having established a number of categories by which to group sections of the discussion, I then began the process of focused coding by re-reading the scripts several times each. With these readings I was continually questioning whether the initial codes were satisfactory and sought a second opinion from my research supervisor. Once I had decided on the five thematic categories (plus two overlapping sub-themes – see Chapter 5; Figure 12) and given them

appropriate names, I then constructed a qualitative analysis drawing from the relevant policy fields and the theories of community explored in Chapters 1 and 2 and illustrated with quotes from across the five Look Group case studies and the elite interviews.

4.2 Complexity Analysis

The qualitative analysis established a sense of meaning to the empirical data which provided a necessary bridge to the Complexity analysis. Chapter 6 draws from the Complexity literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and determines whether or not the main themes identified in the thematic analysis corresponded with the hypothesis that the interpretation of the Look Group as a sustainable community can be understood as the functioning of a complex system. The interpretation of the thematized data from the perspective of complexity intends to contribute a richer understanding not only of how community sustainability is manifest, but to put forward hypotheses of why it has occurred. Reported phenomena like improved collective memory and system dynamics such as differentiated role function could thus be interpreted using some of the key concepts of a complex adaptive system – emergence and self-organisation – allowing a new level of understanding of sustainable community behaviour to surface.

4.3 Micro Sustainability Analysis

The two levels of data examination performed revealed iterative patterns of group behaviour which appeared to apply to seemingly different phenomena reported within the confines of the case study. These patterns were developed into a simple model of community participation which forms an additional layer

of analysis for this study and a potential tool for future studies of group and community dynamics. The Ebb and Flow cycle, its name derived from a description of community behaviour put forward by a Look Group member²⁵⁵, shows five ordered stages of public participation which are observable across the case study data and additionally within the public policy and theory reviewed in Part 1 of this thesis

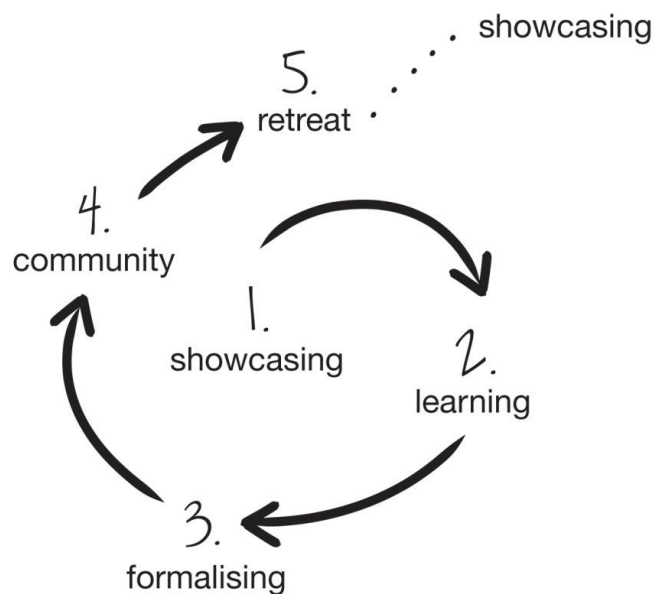


Fig.4 The Ebb and Flow Cycle

The Ebb and Flow cycle is used in Chapter 6 to present a new understanding of community sustainability using micro interactions and relationships. Its potential is also explored from a Complexity perspective through its interpretation as an adaptive feedback loop model.

Chapter Conclusion

Complexity precipitates a challenging methodological position for the researcher. The lack of a single coherent theory, the self-reflexive blurring of

²⁵⁵ Look Group 3

the distinction between observer and observed and considering how to collect data without over-determining the Complexity within the results are three major tests. The literature on social systems is lacking in sufficient detail to assist an early career researcher, with the community as a unit of analysis a significantly under-researched area. In approaching this research, my intentions have therefore been to create a robust qualitative data set which documents a complex phenomenon, onto which a Complexity analysis can be applied. Participant Observation offered an overarching methodological approach that would ensure the experiences and behaviours of the groups of learners and the stakeholder organisations were recorded accurately. The ways in which the different kinds of learning identified in Chapter 3 (self-directed, incidental and tacit) could be observed at the meetings was of particular relevance in understanding the conditions for the sustainability of the groups and would only have been possible by attending and taking part in the activity. The detailed explanations of the meaning and significance of relationships within the groups, between partners and between the project were also enhanced by immersion, participation and observation.

This chapter concludes Part One and the context setting for this research project.

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Part Two: Findings

Introduction to Part Two

Part Two comprises two chapters which present the findings in relation to the three central research questions. Chapter 5 is a qualitative analysis of cross-cutting themes from the three participant groups and revisits ideas from Chapter 3's review of theories relating to community to explore the significance of the five selected themes in relation to community sustainability and the conditions which support the sustainability of the Look Groups. The deep theoretical analysis however is reserved for Chapter 6 in which these five cross-cutting themes are examined from a Complexity Theory perspective to shed light on the dynamic processes which have sustained the Look Groups.

Where quotations from the interviews and focus groups are included, the following abbreviations are used:

LG – response from Look Group participant

CC – response from Cornwall Council interviewee

TS – response from Tate Staff

See Appendices 2 and 3 for further details.

Chapter 5 – Research Findings I: Conditions

Chapter Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the findings from the data in relation to Research Question 1 – What are the conditions which support the sustainability of the Look Groups? The chapter presents a cross-cutting and analytical understanding of the conditions which support community sustainability from the three perspectives documented: project (Tate St Ives), political (Cornwall Council) and community (Look Groups). The analysis also provides a bridge between the grounded data collection and the Complexity analysis which follows in Chapter 6 demonstrating that the selection of themes analysed within a Complexity framework have emerged from inductive analysis of the results rather than being pre-determined by the theory. This reflexive, iterative approach to the data analysis (as detailed in Chapter 4: Methodology) also allows my own personal and professional knowledge and experiences of the case study project and the relationships between the participant groups to be made explicit and add to the interpretation.

The qualitative analysis finds that perspectives on community sustainability are expressed in two main ways – data relating to how and why specific conditions have contributed to the sustainability of the Look Groups and data which expresses an understanding of more general conditions which contribute to community sustainability. The Look Groups and the project partners identify some issues around community sustainability which they view as specific to Cornwall. Also of interest is the intersection between the views on Look Group sustainability and the more general view of social sustainability which indicates

participants' alignment of the Look Group project with their own self-generated principles of community sustainability.

The analysis of the data was performed manually with close reading and coded dissection of the texts allowing themes to surface. Each discussion group and interview recording and transcription were examined multiple times with reference to my accompanying observation notes. Once a draft set of themes had been labelled, I returned to the transcriptions to re-contextualise the themes and make adjustments to their content to ensure accuracy and accountability to the original, uncoded data.

The chapter explores in detail five themes which surfaced in each of the five Look Group discussions and which were also present in the contextual interview data. Many of the themes overlap and some could be considered sub themes but all have a strong accompanying category of evidence and demonstrate significant patterns in the conversations and interviews.

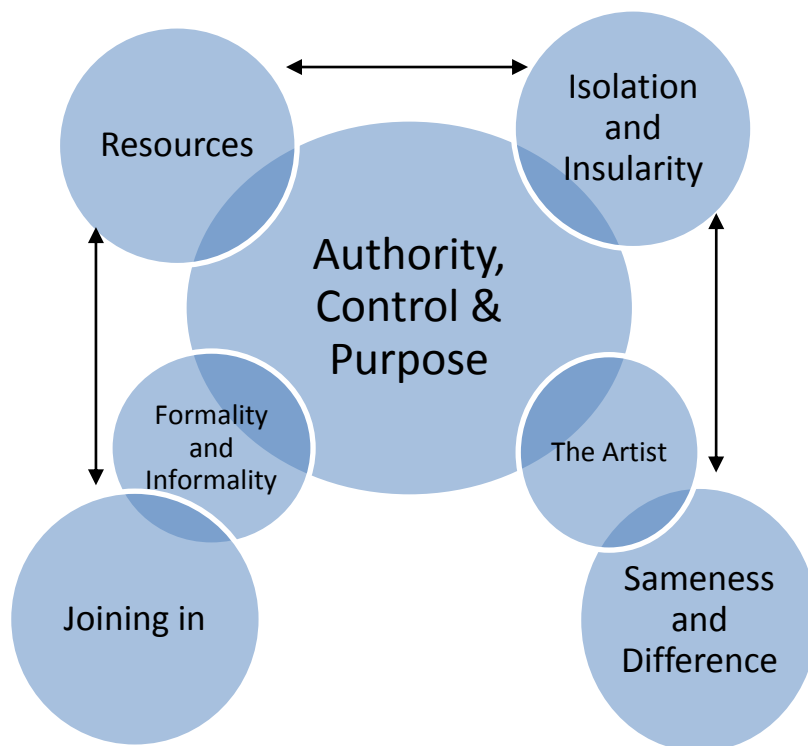
The five main themes to be reported here are:

- 1. Who's in charge? – Authority, control and purpose**
- 2. Resources**
- 3. Isolation and insularity**
- 4. Joining in**
- 5. Sameness and Difference**

Figure 12 shows the relationship between the five themes. Authority, control and purpose is the central topic which connects to the other areas of concern (shown by the overlapping circles). There are also connections to be observed between the remaining themes which are represented by line arrows. The themes of joining in and sameness and difference have two major sub-themes –

formality and informality and the artist identity - which also connect with the central theme of authority.

Figure 5: Qualitative analysis - thematic relationships



Theme 1 - “Who’s in charge?”: Authority, Control and Purpose

The title of this theme refers to a series of rhetorical and literal questions posed to me by the Look Groups about Tate St Ives’ management of the project that also echoed feelings and tensions which all the participant groups articulated in relation to external influences and issues of control. The analysis of this theme will aim to explore why forms of authority and control are of particular relevance to the sustainability of the Look Groups and to the sustainable community more generally. It will also expose the impact of community identity and purpose being designed or enforced by a public sector body.

Theories of community as outlined in Chapter 1 reveal this negotiation of authority between government and community to be a very well-worn groove in the literature. The notion of the social contract between state and society whether motivated by security from conflict or protection of property requires a handing over of control to a higher power but also a responsibility by citizens to hold government accountable and to organise themselves into democratic units which can continue a process of power negotiations. The means by which communities can self-organise and enter into a dialogue with a government agency is determined to a degree by the prevalent ideology of the state. The Coalition Government's emphasis on devolving authority from the centre and placing greater responsibility on civil society and the voluntary sector appeared to put the power with the community but as the analysis of the Big Society revealed in Chapter 3, this devolution was highly structured and controlled.

1.1: External influences, control and dependency

All participant groups reported a sense of being resistant to external forces or influences. For Tate, the relationship with the external funding programme was problematic and the legal obligation to provide a safe environment for staff and audiences was also burdensome. For Cornwall Council, the resistance reported was due to Tate moving too fast setting up the project (in light of timescales set by the funder) during a time of structural and strategic change within the local authority. Tate interviewees also recognised this pressure but were sensitive to their own organisation's size and complexity contributing to a slow pace of working. The Look Groups reported resistance to being told what to do by TSI and more generally by authority groups or figures.

In contrast to this resistance to authority, the participants described the benefits to the partnership and protection of an external influencer. But there is a sliding scale of enthusiasm which accompanied these reports. Cornwall Council appeared to actively welcome certain external influences because they reduce their isolation and they invited partnership with other forms of government rather than awaiting direction or being forced to adapt to a new political environment which could be costly:

they're not going to come to us, so we've got to go to them. So we've knocked on the door of Whitehall and we've given various presentations to senior civil servants, ministers, secretaries of state and it's really started to take hold to the extent that the phone does ring, the e-mails are coming through from people in Whitehall saying 'What do you think? If we were to announce this as a pilot would you be interested?' (CC2)

The Look Groups were appreciative of the structure, impetus and resources which founded the groups. They also accepted the artistic authority which Tate commands through its expert knowledge of modern and contemporary art and its networks within the art world but did not welcome the ongoing supervisory relationship they believed Tate wanted to assert in terms of group organisation. Tate seemed reluctant in their acceptance of the financial benefits of working with Cornwall Council and the central government departments who fund this and other programmes. But the interviews showed much commitment to giving audiences a greater voice within the building and in determining the relationship between gallery and community which is suggestive of the organisation embracing a bottom-up approach to governance:

in a context like Cornwall there's huge sensitivities. I think there's potentially a massive risk that people would see this as a kind of Tate (...) trying to, not necessarily take over but there's a kind of sense of the overbearingness of the organisation. I think we're trying to get away from

the 'we're going to do this to you' and we're trying to suggest that there's a kind of openness and a dialogue and actually cultivate a much more democratic way of working and actually empowering people. (TS3)

Despite their concerns about being seen as “overbearing” and the more general commitment to listening to their audiences referenced in the previous paragraph, Tate demonstrated a dominant control role by moving to “shut down”²⁵⁶ a Look Group that were meeting in a pub (see Appendix 2). They have also maintained a more passive role in allowing other groups to conclude their activities by not renewing funding or not intervening in areas such as member recruitment.

Power relationships, which were widely discussed in the context of the Look Group project and connected to broader ideas about the role of Tate in the community, implied a level of mutual dependence between groups or individuals. As Emerson observed “power is the property of the social relation, it is not an attribute of the actor”²⁵⁷. There is a dependency relationship between Tate and the Look Groups which though often expressed by both groups in terms of frustration, fragility and tension is nevertheless a source of sustainability.

The dependency relationship is evident thus: Tate needs the Look Groups to fulfil its mission and sustain itself as an organisation. The funding which the Look Group project has attracted has been invested in staff posts, equipment and the gallery building. The project also helped to advance negotiations with Cornwall Council regarding the expansion plans by demonstrating a commitment to engage with communities across Cornwall. Look Group co-

²⁵⁶ Tate Staff Interviewee 4

²⁵⁷ Emerson, R.M. (1962) p31

ordinators report on attendance to Tate to allow meetings to be counted as off-site learning activity and measured against the DCMS key performance indicators. One identified aim of setting up this model of self-directed learning was to move away from the unsustainable adult learning “convention”²⁵⁸ of talks and tours in the gallery. But in order to get the groups to a point where they understood the idea and how to manage their learning, Tate provided services and resources which the groups then became dependent on. The provision of a public venue (to be discussed in the following theme) is the most significant resource on which the groups depend and some groups gave a sense that if this support were withdrawn they would stop meeting. In considering the significance of these discussions in relation to community sustainability, the tension between Tate and the Look Groups about authority and control indicates a process of negotiation over needs, limitations and equity. The symmetry within these negotiations was continually changing with both groups in a state of imperfect information about each other’s needs and desires.

There was also a tension between perspectives within the groups. Tate, for example had an institutional agenda which those interviewed were trying to follow. This agenda was expressed through ideas of trying not to overspend or break the law and trying to remain focussed on agreed strategies rather than being led by the other myriad of ideas which might come unsolicited from Tate’s wide ranging constituencies and audiences. But these agendas often conflicted with the personal aspirations of the individual staff members who genuinely wanted to increase audience empowerment and enjoyment. This was a source of potential division within the organisation but also opened up opportunities for

²⁵⁸ Tate Staff Interviewee 3

the groups to negotiate with a rational person rather than a faceless set of rules. An illustration of this is the fact that not every group is subject to the same controls – some still have their venue fees paid for example.

1.2: Purpose – formality vs informality

The Tate interviews revealed the internal variance in opinion about the degree to which structure should be imposed on groups.

I suppose the concern if I had any was about whether the model reverts to a more didactic model (TS2)

I think there were anchor points that without which it would have been very difficult to ...see how it could have continued to develop. (TS3)

My visits to the groups confirmed that the rules and structures which the groups employed informally, many of which borrowed from formal education such as taking turns, doing homework and acting democratically, were the legacy of Tate's initial involvement. But formality was not just evident in the way which the Look Groups and the partner organisations structured the learning activity. Running throughout the Look Group experiences and their views on what constitutes a sustainable community was a strong sense of enjoyment. This was in contrast to ideas of personal or social improvement which formed the prevailing view of the Tate and Cornwall Council interviewees.

The Look Group Research and Networking Day (Appendix 4) produced some of the most interesting data on this theme with members really questioning what the purpose of the Look Group project was and how to encourage greater diversity in participation. There was a lively discussion reflecting on why young people were not attracted to meetings and what could be done to encourage a younger membership. One respondent with teenage children talked about how young people find it difficult to be without their mobile phone in a social situation

and that if the groups wanted to be more open they would have to reassess whether they wanted to remain a “social form” where it “isn’t the done thing to sit there with your phone.”

My attempts to organise the Networking event and to keep participants informed about the different activities was analysed in a similar way by one Look Group member. She used the expression “format” to describe the conventions I had used – the use of a PowerPoint presentation, a balance of spectator and participant activities, a schedule of events - and whilst she welcomed certain aspects of the organisation, she felt uncomfortable with others and asserted her artist identity as part of her reasoning for this discomfort:

Creative people are not format people (F1 LG1)

As I reflected in the report, I saw a contradiction in this assertion. Creative process has formality to it and adherence to those creative conventions is what gives the artist or creative their identity as I explore in *The Artist Identity* - a sub theme to Sameness and Difference.

The informality of the group organisation extended to the amount of preparation, research or volunteering expected of members. Only Look Group 5 had agreed that everyone should prepare something in advance of meetings:

... the important thing for me is some people are working and I don't think homework should be part of the Look Group – it's purely voluntary. If people are interested to find out, bring things in that's great but it's not necessary. (F3 LG2)

In contrast, one area of formality that did seem to prevail within all the groups was the adherence to the art discussion topic sometimes at the expense of building friendships:

I think when we're here we don't necessarily discuss ourselves. We're discussing what we're looking at, we're discussing somebody else or somebody else's work. We don't actually talk about ourselves very much and chat to each other socially so much. (F1 LG3)

In terms of the sustainable community and its relationship with the state, this perspective again raises the question about the degree to which government can really build community. In this case study, Tate has a government mandate to increase public understanding of visual art, not to build social relationships and yet I was able to observe how strong social connections had been made which continued to develop outside of the Look Group meetings. The project has thus brought members together as a focussed learning community which in turn has provided the conditions for new relationships to develop into communicative and social relationship which form the basis of friendships and support networks.

The Cornwall Council interviewees also provided some interesting perspectives on the informality and formality distinction. Both described how it was difficult to find volunteers for either civil society committees or to stand for election to the Council reflecting that there was a huge difference in motivation between the individual who would get involved with a voluntary organisation because it was fun or because it would bring them into contact with their social group and those who would take on a formal role with responsibilities such as managing the finances of an organisation:

you are looking for those real (...) sparks within the community – those individuals who've got the energy, who've got the ability to (...) bring people together and with that enthusiasm keep people on board and (...) I don't think there's enough of those or if there are they are keeping their head down and it's a hard job working with councillors, the voluntary and community sector to identify those leaders who are in the community..(CC2)

You may get a volunteer who is happy to come and do certain sorts of activities but they don't want to join a committee, they certainly don't want to become treasurer, they don't want to become chairperson. So there's a thing around people doing a bit but the idea that you'd actually take on governance positions, you know, the committee positions and all that is just not that attractive. (CC1)

Theme 2 - Resources

Resources refer to a broad category of knowledge, skills and material assets which the participant groups value within the structure of the Look Group and more broadly within community life. As previously stated, the provision of resources is very closely related to authority and control with the ability to pay for venues providing one means for Tate to assert control over the network. The results point to the significance of three Look Group resources: the co-ordinator, the venue and the Ning and their relationship with one another.

The discussion begins with a review of the general comments relating to community resources. Venues were the most cited resources and were viewed by all the participant groups as hubs around which different networks could form. Pubs, post offices, schools, shops, cultural venues and even public toilets were given as examples of essential community infrastructure which drew people together and made it possible for communities to survive. The public venue was seen as a very basic requirement for community life. Whatever references were made to other community resources such as soft-skills (diplomacy, ability to join in, communication) or knowledge (technical or art history, how people are connected) the respondents would always return to the importance of the physical place in facilitating proximity and interaction through which these other resources could be utilised. There was also widespread agreement across the participant groups that state provision of venues was

important. In one example a Tate interviewee talked about the potential for cultural hubs to form in libraries and in some way fill the void left by the decline in church attendance with public funding providing a “level of health and safety and warmth (...) internet access, bit of art, a few books”²⁵⁹ and volunteers managing the resource and activities within. The political perspective put forward was broadly in agreement. It was through capital investment in venues that Cornwall Council saw a potential role for sustaining a host of community activity. Unlike revenue funding, capital was easier to come by through borrowing or through the release of assets from the existing Council portfolio and could be invested in infrastructure which would reduce the running costs such as photovoltaic panels or revenue generating facilities like a café. These investments could also be seen to contribute to sustainability beyond the economic business model – photo voltaic panels bring an environmental benefit and a cafe is a social hub. The conducting of the research project at a time of austerity measures and major reductions in public spending was evident, however. The most recent developments in Cornwall Council’s cost savings exercise detailed in Appendix 1 reveal that despite these political aspirations for sustaining venues, many key public buildings like libraries will not be spared.

2.1: The Co-ordinator

As section 5.2 will explore through the idea of the artist identity, different members play different roles within the group structure and activities. The co-ordinator has an externally determined role to play which has been democratically approved by the group. As well as organising the activities of the group – maintaining membership lists, chairing the meetings, making

²⁵⁹ Tate interviewee 2

arrangements for groups visits – the co-ordinator is the channel through which Tate communicated with the groups.

through a person in a community, on the ground at real grass roots level there's kinds of conversations (...) coming right down to the basics of actually somebody just telling somebody else 'this is a programme, this is where it's happening' and actually reaching a different audience from the one that the gallery can reach... (TS3)

Tate recognised the importance of this conduit by inviting all the co-ordinators to each exhibition opening thus recognising their status alongside other key gallery advocates such as local councillors and the Tate St Ives Members. In all the groups observed the co-ordinator fulfilled a pastoral role with examples including tea making, cake baking and organising car sharing, The groups also identified an important role for the co-ordinator in maintaining order and co-operation:

(F5) makes an excellent co-ordinator, holds the whole thing together and gives everyone respect and time and makes sure that none of us hog it or whatever and it really works (LG2)

2.2: Venues

Moving from the general comments on community resource to the specific project experiences, it was clear that The Look Groups' most valued resource was the meeting venue. Private spaces (classrooms, meeting rooms) within public venues were most commonly used because they are located centrally and accessible to everyone. Members talked about neutrality, centrality to their dispersed rural communities and privacy being important qualities in encouraging initial participation and ongoing attendance. One observation from my first visits to those Look Groups meeting in public venues was that they had little or no personal connection with the venues. The venues had been selected

by Tate and if the gallery were still responsible for funding the room hire this was done via an impersonal invoicing system. Meeting in the evening gave the members no opportunity to interact with staff who might have had an interest in their continued presence or who might have been able to assist with promoting the group. Several groups mentioned that the only human contact they had with their host organisations was with the cleaning or caretaking staff who by the end of evening were keen to finish their shift – one respondent talked about the caretaker “coming round on the dot, swinging his keys when it was time to go”²⁶⁰ and this was why her group had opted to move to meeting at home and then to stop meeting altogether. Might this remoteness from the host organisation have been different without the presence of Tate as a third party broker? I hypothesise that most informal groups which self-organise around a group would be likely to choose a venue for location convenience, availability and price but might also make use of their own personal connections with venues. Selecting places that they already knew or had volunteer connections with might limit the constituency from which organisers could invite new participants but would also provide opportunities to negotiate good terms for hire and to extend their involvement from a transactional, customer relationship to being stakeholder through volunteering or other in-kind support. Look Group 5 had successfully employed this model by using their own personal connections to find new accommodation not once but twice in order to sustain their activities. Tate had also embraced the idea of creating a more personal association between host venue and group seen through the example of an FE college benefiting from giving free hire to a Look Group (see Appendix 2.4.1). It appeared that there needed to be more application of the face-to-face contact

²⁶⁰ Look Group 7

so powerfully valued by the Look Groups in securing a sustainable approach to venue provision. Tate clearly wanted to break the dependency on financing venues without destroying the audience relationship which they valued. The host organisation valued the income stream from hiring the spaces and possibly their footfall in terms of demonstrating their public need. But as organisations they could also benefit from the collective and individual skills and passions of Look Group members. Why did the Look Group's ability to organise themselves not extend to making these connections themselves? Had Tate's role in facilitating the relationship between host venues created a transactional, economic relationship that had broken down or prevented a social relationship that would have performed a similar function more successfully in the long term?

2.2: Technology

In contrast to venues, which were viewed across all the participant groups as essential resources for communities, there was a less unified view of the role of technology as a tool for building group and community sustainability. In general, the groups had very simple technology needs. Look Group 1 preferred a very low-tech approach suggesting it is this which makes their kind of learning activity distinct from a formal programme of study:

And we don't need many props really, we manage very well don't we really, with very little. (F1 LG1)

No screen projectors. No powerpoint presentations! (F2 LG1)

By contrast Look Group 2 made full use of their internet enabled classroom, searching for visual material to illustrate the links they made between old and new knowledge:

it's dead handy having the (points at screen to indicate internet) there...cos it's difficult talking about art and artists if you can't actually see their work. (F3 LG2)

One resource which the Look Group participants showed much less enthusiasm for was the Ning. The Ning Social Media platform was widely repelled by the groups as a resource and even those who were using it initially saw their use decline because of the very limited content and feedback being posted. As the quote above suggests one of the main reasons Look Group members did not engage with the resource was a lack of awareness of its existence. For some this was because they were “*not natural Facebook type people*”²⁶¹; others had joined the group after the initial training in using the Ning had ended so had missed a formal introduction. Time constraints and a lack of interest in connecting with the wider network were also cited. As I recorded in Chapter 4, I experimented with the Ning in making contact with different Look Groups and individual members and was torn between thinking it was either completely useless or the resource on which the future of the Look Group network depended.

Here I need to recognise that reluctance to engage with the technology could be a means to perpetuate dominant hierarchies within groups. Keevers and Treleaven describe this behaviour as “practices of ignorance”²⁶², in which a lack of knowledge is deliberately maintained to sustain exclusivity and authority. This idea links to the theories of informal learning through practice explored in Chapter 2²⁶³. The Look Groups have perpetuated their resistance to or ignorance of the Ning through their collective learning, suggesting that talking

²⁶¹ Look Group 2

²⁶² Keevers, L. & Treleaven, L. (2008) p 9

²⁶³ Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991)

face-to-face as a group takes priority over what might have been considered a more individual or private pursuit communicating via the internet – even though this would have connected them with other groups.

Tate and Cornwall Council were both pushing an agenda of digital communication which responded to pressures from the political environment in which they operate. The Look Group project required, for its funders, some kind of legacy and digital tools have been promoted by public funders such as the Arts Council, NESTA and Heritage Lottery Fund as a cost effective and visible means to demonstrate that projects can continue to deliver benefits after funding ceases. The Cornwall Council interviewees suggested that their own interactive online communications (funded by NESTA) were vital to giving residents in remote communities an opportunity to contribute to service design and particularly in engaging younger citizens into the democratic process.

It is worth reflecting on the way that Ning usage relates to consumption of more popular social media. An estimated 83 per cent of UK adults aged 16 and over use the internet and 53 per cent of them use social media websites²⁶⁴ so both organisations are responding to the market. But by developing their own social media platforms they were wasting resources. Research in the US by the Pew Center suggests that the majority of social media users will only engage with one platform. Facebook has maintained a significant majority lead over its competitors in recent years but the emergence of newer platforms such as Instagram and pinterest means the remainder of the single platform market is

²⁶⁴ Office for National Statistics (2013) Statistical Bulletin: Internet Access - Households and Individuals, 2013 Available from: http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_322713.pdf last accessed 01/08/2014

carved up between a growing number of sites.²⁶⁵ The small number of Look Group members who did engage with social media were likely to only regularly visit one of these global sites and would have little time or inclination for another site like the Ning. The two organisations also wrongly assumed that visitors to their social media sites would be active users. Tate's aspiration was that Look Group members would populate the Ning with content which would keep the network active and engaged with the platform, but usage monitoring suggests that creating content is not every user's priority. According to the second most popular social media Twitter, nearly half (40 per cent) of their 15 million users in the UK regard the site "as a curated news feed of updates that reflect their passions"²⁶⁶ and do not send out or share information themselves. Tate needed to make a more persuasive case for why social media was needed for this project, consider using a more popular platform with which members were familiar and ensure that regular support or training was given to new members joining the groups if they had serious ambitions to use digital tools to build a legacy and ongoing communication tool for the Look Group network. Technology and social media undoubtedly have a role to play in supporting these kind of sustainable community relationships but the message clearly articulated by the groups was that face to face contact was the most successful tool to facilitate fruitful and enjoyable learning which in turn contributed to the group's sustainability. The importance of the public venue and informal conventions for facilitating open discussions thus rise in significance as they are not likely to be superseded by new technology or equipment – although they may of course be vulnerable to changes in policy and public participation.

²⁶⁵ <http://oursocialtimes.com/10-useful-social-networking-statistics-for-2014/> last accessed 01/08/14

²⁶⁶ <http://www.rosemcgrory.co.uk/2014/01/06/uk-social-media-statistics-for-2014/> last accessed 01/08/14

Theme 3 - Joining in

The labelling of this theme as 'joining in' in contrast to the more formal possible identifier 'participation', was a conscious decision made partly to reflect the language which some respondents used but also to try to encompass the range of different joining opportunities which were discussed across the participant groups. At an individual level, joining in was described as everything from volunteering a view point in a Look Group discussion to being elected as a Cornwall councillor. Joining in was very much about active behaviours and motivations which made it distinct from a more passive sense of participation which is synonymous with 'attending' though a tension between these different interpretations became an interesting sub-theme and revealed gender differences between respondents. The Look Groups and the partner organisations also believed that the way in which individuals joined in with community activity was linked to age and life stages.

Joining in was perceived broadly across all participant groups as a positive activity. It was viewed mostly as a face-to-face activity that required a physical presence in a shared space although this theme also includes discussions about the online mechanisms for joining in provided by government agencies. Other ideas relating to the role of organisations in either facilitating the involvement of individuals or – and this particularly directed at Tate - extending their immediate remit to engage with communities were reported.

3.1: Joining the conversation

For many respondents, volunteering an opinion seemed to be a minimum requirement for joining in. If you were not able to voice your viewpoint on a

subject whether it was a work of art, how to organise a neighbourhood watch scheme or local politics then you were not truly connected. Many of the Look Group members reported that being part of a conversation about art gave them a sense of empowerment. The rich subject matter and the self-directed nature of the activity were key to this confidence which was observable as a collective and individual phenomenon. Individual empowerment was discernible in examples from my visits to the groups such as the professional and/or practising artists who were able to impart technical knowledge about perspective or members with no prior knowledge taking pleasure in their observations being noted or adopted by others. Confidence thus came through this process of sharing and contributing. The collective empowerment was not really perceptible until the final iteration of negotiated feedback took place at the Research and Networking Day. Throughout the day as groups exchanged stories and experiences of how they had overcome challenges such as recruitment of members and ideas of how to appeal to a broader section of their communities, I could see groups valuing their joint experiences and welcoming the opportunity to speak with a united voice. The presence of staff from the University of Exeter and Tate as observers and witnesses to these discussions added to the seriousness of the experience sharing, which also contributed to group and individual confidence. The announcement that Tate had secured additional public funds to support the network and transform the groups into a consultative body for gallery learning, created genuine excitement.

The idea expressed by the programme designers at Tate and echoed by the Look Group participants that the groups be democratic and welcome all knowledge levels and viewpoints, was an important condition for the group

sustainability. It meant that the only thing that members needed to bring to the group was an opinion, an ability to listen to other viewpoints and an open mind. Looking at art gave plenty of opportunity for opinions to be researched, formed, challenged and defended and for connections to be made with other topics meaning that no group was ever short of ideas for discussions. Across and within the groups, however, there was a difference of opinion about the how involved individual members should be with the discussions. For some members there was a clear obligation for members to volunteer an opinion and whilst advocates of this position recognised the difficulties that this might present to those lacking self-confidence, they also made the case that this was an improving or beneficial:

The other thing is to ...you are opening yourself out because if you sit here and you produce...whether it is 'I love the shard' or 'I love the gherkin' or (...) 'I find conceptual art very difficult' whatever it is, you're exposing yourself to everybody else (...) You're putting yourself up to be kissed or slapped and you have to get over it..(M2 LG3)

And you only get out, well it's true for anything in life, you get out what you put in. So you had to you know make yourself come and find something(...) And then interact with, if you're just sat here each week then we'd all go...(M1 LG1)

The quotes above, both by male voices though representative of other viewpoints by both gender, were included in my presentation to the research and networking day. The recordings of group discussions which followed the presentation and comments made to me personally revealed sensitivity to these comments. Respondents felt that joining in was about attending meetings and that listening was valuable as well as contributing. Here the data is suggestive of a strong overlapping sub theme of formality and informality shared between *Authority, Control and Purpose* and *Joining In*.

There was a widespread belief amongst the groups that men were less likely to join in or socialise. The members pointed at the high proportion of women taking part in the Look Groups and in other voluntary associations and activities as evidence of this which these quotes illustrate:

I don't want to generalise but men I don't think are quite as outgoing as women. Well my husband isn't anyway (...) in a joiny way, if you know what I mean.

(F3 LG1)

Yes I mean my husband has not made friends. We've been here five years but he's made friends through my friends and it's a different, and yet when we were first married he was the one who made friends. (F3 LG4)

Women however provided alternative viewpoints:

I don't think I'm a joiner as such but I like my reading hence the Book Group and well I like the art exhibitions but other than that I don't really think I'm much of a joiner. So community – don't know. We lived in a tiny little village before and it was just hell...I think it rather put me off communities.

(F5 LG2)

I think community is important but it's easier for some people than others. Some people naturally can be gracious and nice and whatever I have to try a little harder to be that....(F4 LG5)

Joining in was also a significant theme in the discussions around community sustainability with volunteering and participation underpinning the success of a community and here age or life stage was also highlighted as a contributing factor in the degree to which an individual or group within the community would get involved:

you need people of that age who've got the energy, they haven't really got the time in all honesty, but you need people who are movers and shakers I suppose to make things happen because it doesn't work if there's nothing. You know if the brownies has closed, the scouts have closed and the youth club closes. (F1 LG3)

And there has to be something to join in... (F4 LG2)

These two extracts also provide succinct hints as to why communities may welcome intervention from outside. As with the Look Groups, a publicly funded programme can provide the foundation and focus which might not have come from the community itself but which is welcomed. The challenge for communities and their sponsors is in negotiating models which are self-sustaining and unintrusive.

Theme 4 - Isolation and insularity

Within the isolation and insularity theme, there was a difference between the way Cornwall Council and Tate express these ideas and the way that Look Group members discuss relevant experiences. The Tate and Cornwall Council interviewees are expressing views from an institutional perspective and whilst some Look Groups are able to present a collective view on certain issues, the idea of isolation in particular brings together some of the most personal and emotive data from individual members talking about their experiences. There is also the distinction that Tate St Ives and Cornwall Council are symbols of devolved government – Cornwall Council obviously with much longer and broader roots as a local authority - but both providing opportunities for residents in Cornwall to have a greater connection to central government and a wider society. By contrast, many of the Look Group members had made a conscious decision to migrate and remove themselves from the centre in some way. Some Look Group members were in search of a sense of community that could not be found in their urban settings, others were returning to family or communities they had left behind in order to pursue studies or careers and a final category of members were searching for seclusion.

Uniting the experiences of the participant groups was a sense of being isolated by geography. London in particular was seen as the centre of Tate's operations, Cornwall Council look to Whitehall and the capital is referenced by numerous Look Group members spread across the selected cases, as their previous home and/or a cultural playground. Plymouth was also referenced by respondents in each participant group as a place of business and culture which whilst closer to Cornwall geographically remains a very distinct environment. More specific to the Look Groups was an expression of social isolation and loneliness. Insularity was also discussed, though the contexts described point to a blurring of distinction between isolation, insularity and loneliness which requires careful analysis.

4.1: Geographical isolation

Tate's geographical isolation from its centre in London was suggested in different ways from references to decision making processes having to be referred to colleagues in London to the administrative challenge of working remotely from centralised departments such as IT, finance and human resources and how this impacted on the pace of the Look Group project. As an employee I had always bristled at the description of Tate St Ives as an outpost of the Tate gallery. We believed our exhibition and learning programmes, remote coastal location and relationship with the artistic community of St Ives and Cornwall were unique strengths that contributed to the Tate brand and we were more than just a building to which Tate dispatched works of art or curators. Making explicit Tate St Ives' unique offering to the Tate family and to the gallery's audiences had become a significant preoccupation in building a case for support for the gallery expansion plans. My colleagues and I with

communications within our job specifications had worked hard to craft messages which emphasised our regional role. One interviewee reminded me of a vision statement which articulated Tate St Ives ambition to become “an international centre of art and exchange at the heart of Cornwall”²⁶⁷. Not all staff were so confident of this approach - I recall having a heated exchange with a member of the curatorial team who felt that the reference to Cornwall in this vision statement was “parochial” and could be harmful to the art-engaged audiences they were trying to reach through a cutting edge contemporary exhibition’s programme. My argument was that we needed to build more local relationships as a priority in order to secure the support needed for the gallery expansion, otherwise we would continue to be seen as an “outpost” – a label which was a challenge to our survival. A colleague had revealed to me that at a senior manager’s meeting, when invited as part of a “blue sky” activity to select one thing to let go of, one of Tate’s most senior directors had proposed debating letting go of Tate St Ives. This was only ever an exercise in imagining and never to my knowledge a serious debate. But whether selected for its reality or humour it is an indication that Tate St Ives was viewed as being at the margins of the organisation. I feel confident, with hindsight, that this very deliberate and emphatic repositioning of Tate St Ives’ focus was instrumental in helping staff to overcome isolation from the community of St Ives, from their peers in the visual arts, culture and heritage sectors in Cornwall but also, importantly, in making the gallery distinct and interesting within the Tate family. This perspective is reinforced by data from the Cornwall Council interviewees. One respondent described how this kind of shift was observable at successive Tate St Ives Advisory Council meetings in which senior Tate staff began to

²⁶⁷ TS2

embrace the idea of the different Tate sites having their own identity and branding.

Cornwall Council interviewees expressed a sense of geographic isolation from Whitehall, the centre of government, but also through the challenge of connecting with other professionals from outside the organisation. CC2 spoke of not getting out of the county frequently and being pleasantly surprised when able to connect with and be complimented by people. One of the Tate interviews reported a similar experience at a conference in Plymouth. The city also surfaced as a place which Look Groups had visited to access exhibitions not on display in Cornwall. As well as being Cornwall's nearest urban centre Plymouth can also be seen as a place of difference which allows the respondents to retreat from their usual context and connect with others. This movement to a different environment and the connection with new communities facilitates reflection on what they value within their usual context. This is mirrored in the Look Group's behaviour as a collection of individuals who have retreated into a focussed area of study and find that they know more and can apply this knowledge more effectively when they come together.

4.2: Insularity

Insularity was also a theme which surfaced in the data. The Oxford English Dictionary gives two main definitions of insular – one relating to an active disinterest or ignorance of other cultures or knowledge; the other is a more passive lack of contact with other people related to geographic isolation or segregation. The contexts which two respondents, quoted below, use to describe insularity, are indicative of the first meaning as both describe insularity

in a social setting. One respondent talked about insularity in relation to being part of a painting group:

if there's a few of you paint together then you can get quite insular about it and it's nice talking to people who don't actually paint or that have other views on things (LG3)

The other – an individual with lots of friends and longstanding friendships and connections in her villages - identifies community as a source of insularity:

It's nice that I can dip in because I'm not like... what my Nan used to call it 'housing' where you go round people's, like all that. So I can sort of go away and I shut my gate (...) and you go "alright, ok I'm glad I don't live in there". (laughs) (...) it gets very insular...(F2 LG2)

These extracts from the data, although thematically connected with ideas of isolation and being alone, connect closely with the theme of *Sameness and Difference*. In both cases the respondents appeared to be saying that if there is too much similarity between the types of people or the types of activity being undertaken over time (such that it becomes routine) that these groups became ignorant of or lost interest in the views or behaviours of the rest of the community or those of wider society. This idea connected in turn with the argument that the sustainable community must foster connections and networks so that the ideals or 'pillars' of sustainability are grown from within and are relevant to all sectors of that community.

4.3: Loneliness

Some of the most compelling data came from Look Group members who reported their experiences within the groups as helping them to overcome loneliness. Often the term isolation was used but it appeared from the context description that the respondents were talking about a negative emotional reaction to being alone rather than simply being on their own. Much of the

discussion around this topic was linked to inward migration – there were recent migrants to Cornwall in every Look Group – but age and life stage were also reported as reasons for loneliness and social isolation.

One Look Group member talked about feeling excluded from different groups because she did not have children and was working during the day so was not able to access interest groups that retired members of the community might join:

I think it's quite hard if you are a certain age, in-between – if you're not retired and you haven't got children then you don't get involved with the school and you don't necessarily get involved with other things (...) for me, being in the middle it's quite hard to actually join a lot of things so then you can get a bit isolated. (F1 LG2)

The speaker later repeated this idea of isolation and my journal and the recording noted a tone of sadness or disappointment in her voice. I was particularly drawn to the description of middle age as a place of isolation when spatially, and politically the centre (for example of a city, of government) is seen as a place of multiple connections and a vantage point for power. I saw a link between the sentiments expressed in this description of isolation and another thread within the Look Group results relating to isolation and the health impact of being alone. The quote below draws a connection between the informal learning activity and health highlighting that the mental stimulation and companionship that may provide protection against dementia and loneliness:

And I feel it keeps everybody out of the doctor's surgery for several reasons. Firstly it keeps their brains going so they're not going to get Alzheimer's quite so quickly. Most importantly they are not going to be so lonely because some are divorced, widowed or whatever living alone and that can make people feel a sense of loneliness. (F5 LG1)

Launched in 2011, The Campaign to End Loneliness is a partnership of charities, government agencies and research organisations working together

with the aim of reducing loneliness in old age. The campaign positions loneliness as a health issue and cites the effects of loneliness on health as being the same as “smoking 15 cigarettes a day”²⁶⁸. From the perspective of the sustainable community, isolation is thus positioned not only as a challenge to social cohesion, collective authority and resource sharing but as threat to the health and biological survival of the group. The involvement of major public organisations including the Department for Health and the Local Government Association working together on this campaign is an indication of the threat which the state perceives in terms of the sustainability of public services. Being alone is a significant health risk which with it brings a cost to the public purse as the member from LG 1 surmised.

Theme 5 - Sameness and difference

This theme explores different perceptions of individual and community identity and the role of difference in generating sustainability. Two main sub topics were present in this data grouping. The first relates to place and revealed widely held views that depth of belonging had a strong association with the length of time spent in a community. Insiders were viewed as the custodians of valuable knowledge; some formalised like the traditions of local feast days and others tantalisingly out of reach to the outsiders. These unwritten rules become a source of anxiety for those who wish to engage. The second topic is closely connected with the visual art focus of the learning activity and explores the role which the artist plays in the Look Group and the wider community and how this may contribute to sustainability. As outlined in Figure 12, this sub theme also connects with the central theme of *Authority, Control and Purpose* with the artist

²⁶⁸ <http://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/>

assuming or being given a position of authority based on their expertise, experiences or talent.

As detailed in Appendix 3, sameness was most consistently discussed through the expression “like-minded” which surfaced in the descriptions of why Look Group members had got involved as participants and why they continued to attend meetings. There were also references to like-mindedness in relation to other social groupings which make up communities. It remained an elusive term and pointed to a range or combination of factors including class, education, interests and personality. Sameness was also a prominent theme within the reflections by the members on the homogeneity of the groups with participants questioning the high proportion of female and older members and wondering how to reach out to men and younger people. In contrast the two sub themes described in greater depth below explore positive and negative experiences of difference and diversity, though as *The Artist Identity* proves, being distinctive can also attract sameness as groups form around specific identities.

5.1: Insiders and outsiders

The emergence of this theme from the data reflects the transitory nature of community identity in Cornwall. A small proportion of participants considered themselves Cornish by birth and made this identity clear but even amongst those who admitted to having moved to the county very recently (within 5 years) there were perceptions of different degrees of belonging. Second home owners and reclusive retirement migrants were groups given as examples of outsiders

because of their failure to contribute to the social or economic success of communities of place:

I think some people come to Cornwall to actually retire and to become a recluse really, don't they? (F1 LG2)

And they contributed really very little. The people who owned the houses were upcountry people – they were second homes and I don't think they did that much. They probably filled their cars up with petrol on the way home and that was about it...and bought a few ice-creams. (F1 LG5)

...we want some really punitive tax put on the second homes (F2 LG5)

The different experiences of individuals who had moved into communities in Cornwall revealed there were some unwritten rules about how to engage with your new neighbours. Incomers need to get involved but they must also be careful to ensure they do not take over:

There's the other extreme if you move into a new community and try and take over. You know, I think you have to blend in and accept the way things are, you can't just storm in and try and change things... I can see why they'd really retaliate if you did (F6 LG2)

It's an odd thing. It's loving your neighbour but keeping them at a distance. It's a very skilled thing to live within a community. (F6 LG3)

This final quote which suggests that community living requires 'skills' hints once again at the link between learning and sustainability and the role which more formalised kinds of learning like the Look Groups can play in allowing communities to reflect on tacit or unconscious learning that has taken place through socialisation. As detailed in Chapter 2 (Figure 2), the examples which surfaced from the group observations included the skills needed to democratically manage a discussion ensuring that no individual member would dominate and that those with less confidence were either drawn into the conversation or left to listen without interruption.

The insider and outsider distinction also surfaced in the contextual partner interviews. CC1 viewed Tate as an outsider through their aloof behaviour, negative response to an invitation to be supported by the local authority but mainly because the organisation was not Cornish. The gallery was part of a London based national organisation and was displaying works associated with a movement of artists who were also incomers to St Ives. The interviewee discussed, however, how this perception had been challenged by the intense programme of community advocacy around the Phase Two expansion plans and extensive learning offer for different audience groups, admitting that “Tate (...) has become (...) part of Cornwall’s heritage and Cornish culture because of these sorts of changes.”²⁶⁹

The insider-outsider distinction is important in a discussion about sustainable communities because it points to the ways in which communities can absorb or be resilient to changes in population. This is a global issue as climate change, conflict and social and economic inequalities drive migration across regional, national and continental boundaries.

5.2: The artist identity

Within the Tate staff interviews and linked to idea of insiders and outsiders there were descriptions of the Look Group project being designed for a kind of outsider audience, those that “don’t get Modern art”²⁷⁰. Despite their attempts to reach out to new audiences who might not have previously connected with the visual arts, each group included individuals who asserted a kind of artistic identity that differentiated them from other members. This difference in identity also created a distinct role for the artist. The purpose or role of the artist within

²⁶⁹ CC1
²⁷⁰ TS1

the group is significant to this thesis because of its potential link to the sustainability of both Look Group and wider community. Artists are valued for the knowledge and expertise they bring to the group and yet the high proportion of artists in Group 7 appeared to be a factor associated with its demise.

Within the discussions, opinions ranged from the idea that being an artist was something you were professionally trained and qualified to do contrasted with the identity being grounded in practice and creative talent. The idea of identity being tied to economic activity was less prevalent but also surfaced. In all the cases where the theme emerged, the artist was viewed as having an elevated status with differing factions within the group sometimes negotiating a definition which would ensure their inclusion within the artist category. The reason for this kind of rarefying seems to have two sets of roots – a localised influence which arises through the interaction of members of the Look Group Network and a broader societal influence linked to the institutions of high culture of which Tate is one. Tate is thus positioned at the intersection of these micro and macro influences on the role and status of the artist.

For the purposes of this part of the analysis the artist is already well defined. The focus of the learning is visual art and those who categorise themselves as an artist within the group have either been trained in or regularly practise a visual art form. Painting, drawing and sculpting are all explicitly mentioned. The artist within the Look Group provides a different contribution to the microcosm of community which the informal learning activity provides. They contribute specialised knowledge to the discussions based on formal training and/or experiences. Some artists talked about bringing along their own work to meetings and one artist even invited her group to her studio to view her

practice. But for the most part, those individuals who aligned themselves with the artist identity contributed to the discussions in a distinct and overt way. Chapter 3 highlighted four concepts of the role of artist in society: civiliser, border crosser, representator and teacher and I use these as a basis for the analysis which follows.

Whilst it appears somewhat antiquated in this context of the Look Groups' democratic learning the conception of the artist as a **civiliser** assists in the understanding of the socio-historical reasons for the more general societal elevation referenced in the empirical data. The idea of the art institution bringing a civilising effect is also implied in some of the discussions. A number of respondents talked about relying on Tate to direct them to contemporary art that they might otherwise find "challenging" (LG1) or be fearful of (LG1, 3,4). In contrast there was resistance to Tate having a more explicit social role with the discussants assuming that the role of the gallery is to collect, care for and present art works which in turn implies a role as arbiter of taste.

- *this is part of a very big strategy it seems to me for large galleries like the Tate to get public money*
- *The Tate gallery is a museum, it is not an instrument of public policy*
(LG5)

The St Ives Modernists, referred to in the Look Group discussions and the contextual interviews, are framed as **border crossers**. They challenged many of the conventions prevalent within the institutions of the day by moving from an urban context to a rural community on the very margins of Britain geographically and in some ways culturally. They formed their own institutions – an Arts club. They upheld an appreciation of the Cornish landscape but interpreted it in new

ways of abstract expressionism which were challenging for their audiences. Much of this border crossing was in embracing modernism which itself could be seen as a political protest against the pedagogical traditions and praxis of figurative landscape and portrait painting.

C Becker's interpretation of the artist crossing the border between private and public spheres and using these spaces as arenas for protest²⁷¹ appears remote from the reality of the Look Groups who sit to discuss art and not to plan revolution. The relationality between the artist and the public sphere, however, is very relevant to these empirical results. The discussions around the lack of support provided to help the groups recruit new members and the continued anxiety around the security of public venues made many members question whether the Look Group was really a private or public activity. And as the analysis of the *Joining In* theme has demonstrated, many of the Look group members and the project partners placed importance on voicing opinions in a public setting. Learning, empowerment and even mental health benefits were all judged to be the outcomes of contributing to the debate in public. And it is these outcomes which in turn contribute to the sustainability of the group.

This conception of the artist as **representator** perhaps best articulates the dynamics within the Look Groups. Artists report wanting to mix with non-artists:

I've been in art so many years of my life and I really like being with people who are a mixture of people, not just art world people. (LG1)

And the non-artists assert the importance of their vital role within the group: their critical stance and their ignorance of techniques or practice enhancing their ability to look and question:

²⁷¹ Becker, C. (2010), (2012)

It might even be easier for somebody who doesn't paint or draw to look, because you're looking at it with really, really fresh eyes aren't you.

Those who can do, those who can't criticise! (LG3)

Diversity of membership is reported as being important to the artists to help them articulate ideas in different ways and to hear how non-artists view the artworld. These descriptions are suggestive of the artists using the Look Group as a sounding board or test audience. This may be an intentional act or a welcome bi-product of the interactions they encounter when they take part. Similarly the non-artists mould themselves as an audience.

The artist and audience are thus presented as providing reflective properties and enter into a dependent relationship. The high proportion of artists in Group 7 which stopped meeting perhaps indicates that this essential relationship of critical reflection and representation was not able to develop and grow. Finding an audience, people who they saw as distinct from the artworld which the artists in other groups referred to as a motivation for joining the activity, may not have been achieved leading to the group's instability.

The **pedagogic role** of the artist within the Look Group was also widely reported from the respondents and here the data revealed a close association with the theme of *Authority, Control and Purpose*. Artists were able to contribute particular knowledge, resources or experiences which helped to enhance the learning taking place and thus the sustainability of the group which creates a position of power:

It's just lovely having these two in the group – they're doing art degrees so they know all the art.(F3 LG2)

I remember at one meeting we had (F5) was having a problem with and one or two other technical aspects of painting and you (F1) were able to explain it to us.(F3 LG1)

Skills and knowledge such as looking and observing, understanding and describing perspective, brush work and other techniques are valued skills and give the artists the authoritative voice which some members seek in their learning. Unlike the hierarchical authority and control which the groups perceive and resist from Tate, the artist authority is bottom up and legitimised by responding to the changing needs of the group. The non-artist members seek out specialist knowledge when they desire it but the democratic model of the learning places importance on individual views and personal responses to the art works or exhibitions. As well as lacking an audience to reflect back representations, the power dynamics in Group 7 may also have been affected by being a group of artists. Too many voices of authority or the reliance on externally sourced expertise may have been destabilising in contrast to the more organic or systematic generation of learning reported by the other groups.

The analysis of the role of the artist in the informal learning activity points to an important relationship between the artist and the sustainable community. In the Look Group they bring knowledge and communication skills which enhance the learning of the group. Many of the artists in the Look Groups typify the migratory pattern of relocation to Cornwall following a major life event such as retirement prevalent across the participant data. Artists, however, are also viewed as drivers of population movement and change. Richard Florida's concept of a "creative class" which encompasses all those in the knowledge economy who are "drawn to the aura that accompanies artists, (and) then pay top prices for these renovated lofts and apartments that will displace the artists who actually made the area desirable to them in the first place"²⁷² is consonant

²⁷² Becker, C (2013) p 11

with the views of many participants. They reference the growth of cultural tourism in St Ives and the rest of Cornwall in response to the historical artist colony in the town, the continued attraction of the region to contemporary artists and how tourism and incomers have caused house prices to rise. The model of the Look Group appears to provide opportunities for participants to reconnect with that “aura” but in a way which generates beneficial connections for the community rather than division or competition for resources.

Chapter conclusion

The five themes presented here point to four groups of interlinking conditions which appear to support the sustainability of the Look Group network and which connect closely with broader participant views on community sustainability. These conditions are: **structure, connectivity, resources** and **diversity**. Communities require a careful balance of these conditions in order to achieve sustainability. Too much structure produces unnecessary hierarchy, authority and control; too little diversity inhibits learning and essential knowledge exchange; the ready provision of resources is valuable but leads to dependency and isolation can bring social and health costs when connectivity is not strong enough within the community.

The data within the theme of *Authority, Control and Purpose* and the sub themes with which it connects, clearly show that no one group have overall control of the Look Group Network. Each participant group are under the influence of very many external political forces and even when these are the same forces, the uniqueness of their perspective means they cannot conceive of the inter-relatedness of these dynamics. This links with the reports of isolation and insularity which result from the loss of social ties through migration

or as a result of a major life event, such as retirement. They indicate a fragmentation of community across which different perspectives on power dynamics cannot be shared. The alternative views put forward that communities coalesce around life events or stages also followed this pattern, with individuals finding themselves excluded because they did not, for example, have children or were not of retirement age.

The analysis also confirms that this is a research project with particular relevance to Cornwall. Appendix 1 explores how population movement is a significant concern for Cornwall where lifestyle, economic and retirement migration continue to grow the population particularly in attractive seaside areas whilst the threat of rising sea levels and coastal erosion may force new patterns of migration into the inland areas. How communities convert these outsiders into insiders so that the diversity of skills, experiences and knowledge are optimised and the potential for conflict or isolation is minimised is a significant challenge. A “how” question like this requires an examination of process, cause and effect and these will be at the core of my second chapter of findings which presents the results in relation to Research Questions 2 and 3 and utilises Complexity Theory to understand how a community survives through self-organisation, adaptation and co-evolution.

Chapter 6 - Findings II: Complex Dynamics

Chapter Introduction

The account of the research project thus far has indicated that where the Look Groups are sustainable there was an optimisation of four interdependent conditions: structure, resources, diversity and connectivity. Before reducing the complexity of the Look Group project and its environment to these four simplified conditions, this chapter will explore in detail the experiences of the Look Groups and their partners through the lens of Complexity to allow some of the relationships between these conditions to surface and come into focus. This will also present the most relevant material collected to respond to Research Questions 2 and 3:

How does the research contribute to the micro understanding of community sustainability?

To what extent does Complexity Theory provide a means for developing a theoretical understanding of sustainable community dynamics and of the dynamics of successfully transferring these conditions to other communities?

What this Complexity analysis adds to the qualitative analysis already undertaken is not only a degree of theoretical focus but the opportunity to map patterns of behaviour which, the paradigm claims, are present throughout the universe. It is looking in more depth at *how* and *why* these behaviours arise. If these universal patterns can be identified in relation to a series of sustainable learning communities, the analysis may offer insight into the relationships and resources needed to create the conditions in other contexts. I revisit the Ebb and Flow cycle and use examples from two distinct areas of the data to illustrate how sustainability is achieved through iterative cycles of behaviour. These are

a composite narrative from three different participant groups about the relationship between Tate and the community in St Ives and the Look Group participation process.

In Chapter 4 I summarised the connections that I have made between the themes from the empirical data and the characteristics of CAS. This analysis will introduce the argument that the sustainability of the Look Groups is due to the non-linear dynamic behaviour within the system and in the interactions between the system and its environment (Section 1). Non-linear dynamics are the supra condition for five characteristics which add understanding to the underlying processes which have sustained the Look Group Network. Self Organisation and emergence help to interpret the question of authority and control in Section 2; the concept of feedback loops explains the significance of key resources in Section 3; the open system boundary and its history assist in the exploration of joining in and isolation in Section 4 and the final Section 5 investigates how ideas from co-evolution, co-adaptation and signal/boundary theory can be applied to the notions of sameness and difference expressed by the respondents.

Section 1 - Non-linearity

*Non linearity, asymmetry, power and competition are inevitable components of complex systems. It is what keeps them going, their engine. If there were a symmetrical relationship between infants and adults, infants would never survive. If there were a symmetrical relationship between teacher and student, the student would never learn anything new. If the state had no power, it would have no reason to exist. If women and men were all the same, our world would be infinitely less exciting.*²⁷³

²⁷³ Cilliers P. (1998) p120

I stated in Chapter 4 that the overarching condition for complexity, through which all the characteristics of CAS are made possible is non-linearity. I will argue here that this is also the overarching condition for the sustainability of the Look Groups. As Cillier's quote above illustrates, non-linearity and asymmetry are the foundation of all political relationships; public or private and section 3 will demonstrate, the basic building blocks of social systems, dyadic active and passive communicative acts exhibit this asymmetry and non-linearity.

Non-linearity presents challenges in a qualitative study of social systems. How do you measure the size of input or the size of impact in order to search for disproportionality? Proving the causality itself will also be problematic. The study has no control group or baseline data to make comparisons with. All results will be subjective and relative. This study takes the approach of highlighting examples where the respondents have reported unexpected or surprising results, presenting the evidence analysed from a Complexity perspective and reporting this as a pattern which appears to match those described by observations from other systems.

The evidence of non-linear dynamics is the maintenance of the groups over an extended period. The Learning Transformation Fund criteria called for projects to demonstrate a strong attention to project legacy and this was recognised through the self-directed nature of the activity designed and by the (ill-received) Ning social media platform. In financial terms however, the relatively small grant investment which was all spent within the first six months of the project has been seen to have created disproportionate results which have been

sustained over a five year period²⁷⁴. All the participants showed some degree of surprise that the programme was still going after three years particularly the project partners. The Tate interviewees described how the constraints of the funding programme required extra staffing at the beginning of the project which could have been spent on other areas to help sustain the project for longer. In my own experiences, revenue projects such as this which have a finite spending period and do not invest in capital assets, generally come to an end with the investment²⁷⁵. This is usually because the project co-ordination is a temporary contracted post or because a full-time member of staff has been drafted in and needs to return to their core work. The kind of legacy hoped for in such cases is that the participants and/or partners will continue a dialogue and find ways and means (finances) to work together in the future. Tate supported the ongoing development of the Look Groups following the end of the initial funding with minimal staff time and financial resources but this support was piecemeal and not evenly distributed across the network. As the qualitative analysis has reported, support also introduced unnecessary structure which appeared to destabilise the groups rather than sustain them. This project was a clear case of non-linear dynamics with small inputs creating large outputs.

Further evidence, comes from the benefits which individuals reported as a result of the intervention. For Tate St Ives to have set up a programme which aimed to develop audiences and increase their ability to learn about the art which then resulted in Look Group members reporting that it was improving their mental

²⁷⁴ The precise amount secured from the Learning Transformation Fund and the terms of the grant are confidential information. The application was submitted under the medium grants programme with a maximum funding limit of £100,000.

²⁷⁵ This perspective was endorsed by Cornwall Council Interviewee 1 who described the Council's focus on capital investment as a means of achieving both economic and environmental sustainability – see Appendix 2.

health and social support networks could certainly be interpreted as unexpected. From being present in the focus groups, I was able to observe facial expressions and body language of the speaker and the enthusiastic assent of their fellow members which confirmed these positive effects as being significant and unexpected. These results suggest emergent behaviour which has been amplified by positive feedback loops.

The power dynamics between the three distinct partner groups in the project (Tate, Cornwall Council and the Look Groups) are dispersed and continually shifting throughout the different stages documented. To the external observer, one group may appear more authoritative at one stage but this may be momentary and the observation may be in stark contrast to the actual experience recorded by the respondents. This non-linearity and asymmetry, both preconditions for complexity, make possible the self-organisation, adaptation and co-evolution present in the Look Group Network case study.

Section 2: Authority and control

The Look Group Network is to a degree part of an organisation and thus a system which has been “assembled deliberately with a specific purpose in mind”²⁷⁶ but it also exhibits characteristics of self-assembly. Tate may have formalised certain conventions like where to meet and the focus of the activity but could not predict or control who would join the groups. There is no defined central controller governing or guiding the process. Instead there is a tension between the system and its environment (which includes Tate and other

²⁷⁶ Page, S. E. (2011) p 45

government agencies) with the competing systems appearing to swing between wanting more or less authority and responsibility.

This tension is indicative of the problem of different dynamics which large organisations and institutions encounter when attempting to engage with new publics. Organisations and institutions tend to exhibit vertical hierarchical behaviours whilst the community is characterised by horizontal peer relationships. Tate and Cornwall Council exhibit these vertical hierarchical behaviours through their compliance with internal and public policies, adherence to governance and financial constraints, recruitment of staff to agreed job descriptions and the delineation of the organisation into function-specific divisions. The community – represented by the Look Groups – show their horizontal peer behaviours through their voluntary support for each other. This is most clearly demonstrated through their peer learning but also through the rich tapestry of social connections which are developing beyond the group. These social networks very clearly “have their roots in life and death experiences in the community, not in contractual hierarchical relationships, nor in the needs of public agencies to deliver their services”²⁷⁷ and their documented sentiments towards Tate reveal that they recognise and follow Tate’s agenda and also resist it. Conn describes this as the process of outreach from the institution which results in the uprooting of community members in an attempt to bring them into the structures the organisation. The process is thus at odd with its aims of community engagement and support. The concerns about health and safety, insurance and accessibility of venues are all organisational concerns for Tate which seep into the consciousness and behaviour of the communities, limiting their choices often unnecessarily.

²⁷⁷ Conn, E. (2011) p 5

As I described in Chapter 2, self-organisation and emergence co-exist in dynamical systems with emergence viewed as a consequence or product of a self-organising system. I propose that as a result of the non-linear dynamics present in the Look Group system, the sustainability of the Look Group Network was achieved through self-organisation. The ability of the network of groups to still be in existence, to have survived for the period under scrutiny (2009 – 2013) relied on a dynamic and adaptive process of acquiring and maintaining structure without the presence of an external controller. This maintenance of structure without dissolving either into chaos or the inertia of stasis then allowed the micro level interactions to produce macro level sustainability of the Look Group system. Self-organisation, I argue, is evident in the way which groups renewed their membership and learning activity – examples of spontaneous self-organisation and the motivations and methods employed in adopting and utilising new venues – adaptive self-organisation. The Complexity concept of self-organisation within this project is problematic as the same term pre-existed as an aim for the learning activity. This analysis aims to move beyond a qualitative understanding of self-organisation which would observe the peer learning within the groups without a formal curriculum or teacher as self-organisation and instead consider a complex systems perspective of self-organisation. This allows the analysis to assess the potential dynamic states of the system and whether and how the system was able to maintain the “far from equilibrium” state conducive to self-organisation. It will also be crucial to explicitly recognise the degree to which the relationship between Tate St Ives and the Look Groups may have affected the autonomy of agents and question what role design and external influence have played in this system. A review of illustrative results which demonstrate self-organisation now follows.

2.1: Membership recruitment

This area, it was expressed universally by the Look Groups, was where they felt a real lack of support from Tate. After the initial advertising to set up the groups there was no Cornwall-wide drive for new members. Some groups even highlighted that Tate was not using its own media and communication channels such as the “What’s On” printed guide, website or staff in the gallery to either promote or be an information point for interested individuals. The posters designed by Tate in consultation with a Look Group forum were derided for their lack of authenticity and were not felt to have been a useful tool. Recruitment thus became the responsibility of the group and was needed to keep the numbers at an optimal level and to ensure a flow of new information and knowledge – including personal opinion – into the group. Some groups handled recruitment in a formalised way through the co-ordinator. Look Group 2’s co-ordinator wrote to the editor of the local Parish magazine with reports of their meetings. This then precipitated more informal connections being made with the editor herself joining the group and bringing along two friends. Other groups utilised their own social or community networks to bring along “like-minded” friends and contacts. The process of returning to each case study group for the negotiated feedback allowed these structural changes through internal dynamics to be observed. As I note in Chapter 7, each group had recruited new members and lost old members which had changed the make-up of the group without altering the overall structure of the group or the way in which the activity took place. These “familiar but unique configurations”²⁷⁸ are the system’s strange attractors, stable points in the system to which trajectories created by

²⁷⁸ Gilchrist, A. (2004) p 88

the dynamics of the system lead²⁷⁹. The most effective level of micro interaction was dyadic. The reports of how each member came to find out about the Look Groups (which are often captured by the simple group dynamic maps – see Figure 6 below and Appendix 3) reveal the effectiveness of individual, personalised word-of-mouth recommendation.

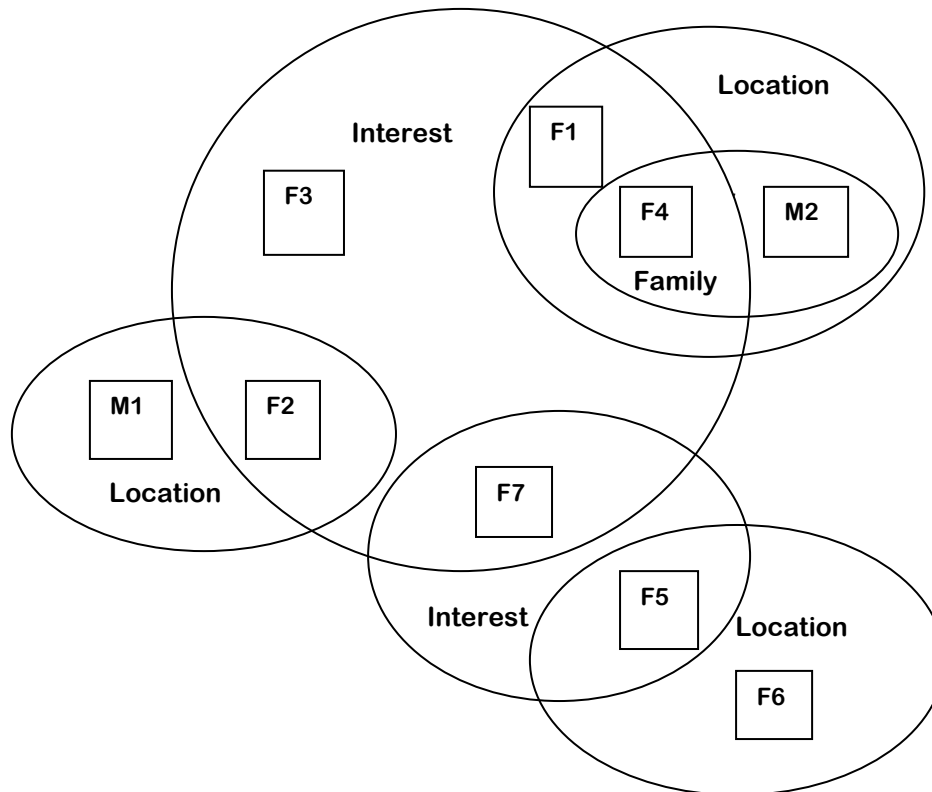


Figure 6: Example Look Group map of relationships

Whilst recruitment relied on dyadic interactions, the focus group data and observations revealed more about alternative micro conditions for the survival of the group. The Look Groups agreed that there was an optimum number of members for a discussion. The modal average from the results was eight members²⁸⁰. As there was a degree of unpredictability of how many members would attend the meeting each month, the groups relied on having a larger

²⁷⁹ Cilliers, P. (1998) p 97

²⁸⁰ Across five groups plus the Research and Networking day

membership pool. Most groups referred to an upper limit of fifteen being “imposed”²⁸¹ by Tate but felt that in practice having twenty individuals on an e mail distribution list managed by the co-ordinator seemed to keep meeting numbers at their optimum. The maintenance of this ideal pool of members points to self-organisation through each member unconsciously following simple rules in their recruitment behaviour. Putting up posters in a public place, let alone banging a gong outside the meeting place to announce the activity, could bring in too great a number of new members and threaten the stability of the group from a practical perspective. Not every venue was large enough to cope with bigger groups and the time allotted would not allow every member to contribute to the discussion. The range of possible information and diversity of opinion flowing into the group could also undermine the activity. The connections which the groups described making between different artists or art movements and which formed the backbone of a stimulating conversation, could extend to such a wide universe that the focus of the discussion would be lost. The safety of the group must also be one such unwritten rule - this particularly pertinent for Group 4 who met in their co-ordinator’s home – and account for the reliance on trusted personal connections. This self-organised criticality²⁸² holds the system at a point where small perturbations to the system can have disproportionate effects. The addition of one member too many could result in members leaving the group or a decline in the quality of the learning.

Learning Activity

The informal learning activity is entirely guided by the members through a democratic process. External data input is evident from the exhibition

²⁸¹ Look Group 1

²⁸² Bak, P. & Chen, K. (1991)

programme at Tate to the Cornwall libraries art collection but there is no control instruction²⁸³. The ideas which members bring to the table – the suggestion of an artist or theme or information about an art event which they can visit together – is again indicative of the use of members immediate connections and environment to facilitate the flow of new information into the group. The collective mental repository of knowledge (sometimes formally documented and archived²⁸⁴) forms the evolving structure of the system – a foundational history to which future discussions can relate. From these interactions emerges a sense of communal learning and other more unpredictable benefits like wellbeing and mental health. This reflects Capra's assertion that the structure of an organism records previous interactions²⁸⁵.

Changing venues

The previous examples have demonstrated spontaneous self-organisation without the influence of an external controller. Self-organisation can also take place adaptively in response to a change in the environment. In the case of groups changing venues this adaptation was triggered by a change in the socio-political environment in which the project was operating with financial constraints on both the project budget and those of the original host venues, forcing groups to seek alternatives which were either free of charge or which suited the collective means of the group. The range of alternative venues also forms part of the environment. Group 5 were able to move venues twice by utilising their individual connections and knowledge of the locale to relocate.

²⁸³ De Wolf, T. and Holvoet, T. (2005)

²⁸⁴ Look Group 5 and groups attending research & networking day

²⁸⁵ Capra, F. (2002) p 31

The local connections are shown to be important. Group 6, one of the two negative cases, relayed their problems with venue back to Tate who without local knowledge of the range of opportunities were unable to secure an alternative and this contributed to the demise of the group. The theme of changing venues is continued into the following section.

The analysis thus far has considered examples of self-organisation from the point that the Look Groups came into existence. In the heated debates I witnessed surrounding Tate's role in informal learning and community activity, the respondents were all agreed that the Look Groups would not have come into existence without Tate's intervention. The organisation provided the "impetus"²⁸⁶ that got the groups started. It could be argued thus that the project is not a true example of self-organisation. As Chapter 2 explored the extent to which characteristics of CAS can be applied to social systems is regularly challenged and this case study illustrates the potential pitfalls of applying complexity metaphors to phenomena without fully understanding their history or relation to the environment. The attraction of the Look Group as a case study is that in investigating an example where the format and focus of the groups have been designed and the intervention carried out within a defined time period, we do have a clearer picture of what the initial conditions were. These are by no means experimental conditions – infinite other variables may be influencing the behaviour of the different agents and systems of which they are members and as Section 4 will document, some behaviours can be attributed to historical events which occurred much further in the past than the project period. The results reviewed here do confirm that Tate created the conditions for self-organisation. In the public sphere where public managers are expected to

²⁸⁶ Look Group 1

demonstrate impact within communities using increasingly limited resources, this model exhibits the right kind of balance of self-organisation to satisfy different hierarchies of influence.

Section 3: Resources

As previously stated, I wish to make a connection between the resources which the Look Groups highlighted as being essential to their survival and the concept of feedback loops. The resources in focus here are those analysed in Chapter 8: co-ordinator and venue with the Ning providing additional evidence of the significance of these key elements for sustainable groups. It was suggested to me that resources like venues can also be viewed and analysed as part of the ecosystem which the Look Groups also belong. The recurrence of venue and co-ordinator as a discussion theme and the connections which the members made between these specific resources and more general ideas of the sustainable community seemed to suggest a different kind of communicative significance.

I believe feedback loops to be a useful metaphor for the research participants to access and utilise due to their prevalence in modern life. We are continually being asked to provide “feedback” to public and private sector service providers in order to improve their provision for our benefit and this idea illustrates the value of the communication cycle. A loop is created when the outputs of a system are available to become a causal input so a cyclical process is present. Negative feedback loops were observed in the Look Groups through the communication of routine: having an agreed meeting time, venue and topic for discussion agreed in advance. These feedback loops keep the groups in

equilibrium and contribute to their sustainability but left some groups vulnerable to stasis as too much order developed which repelled new members. The co-ordinators played a valuable role in relaying information between Tate and the network. This included concerns about the venue – their ongoing financing for example or their suitability. As the final subsection of the previous theme suggested, the lack of feedback from Tate created the conditions for adaptive self-organisation.

The importance of the venue is twofold. Firstly it facilitates the “oblique feedback mechanisms”²⁸⁷ referred to in Chapter 4 which require face-to-face communication. Intonation, facial expression, the ability to whisper to a neighbour or start break-out conversations helped to form the social relations which then flourished outside of the meetings contributing to group sustainability. They were also essential in relation to authority and control. These mechanisms allowed the effective management of the discussion. If one speaker was dominating the proceedings, the mood could be democratically gauged by means of a raised eyebrow and action taken to move the debate on. This means that control was only ever fleeting even in the most ordered groups. The failure of the Ning provides further evidence of the importance of face-to-face contact to facilitate effective feedback loops. Although one member highlighted the benefits of feedback that the Ning facilitated (Group 7), the rest of those respondents who had engaged with the Ning expressed anxiety about using it because they could not see the online community and establish trust or friendship through eye contact and body language.

²⁸⁷ Johnson, S. (2001) p 151

The second reason for the significance of the venue, in relation to the feedback loop, is the introduction of the idea that feedback is not only conveyed through direct verbal communication. In the thermostat example given in Chapter 4, the perturbation across the system is a change in temperature. As living matter, humans also change temperature when they come together and when they are energised by stimulating debate or laughter. The venue itself appeared to be part of feedback loops with the Look Groups to which the participants respond to by either continuing to meet (negative feedback) or finding alternatives (positive feedback). Privacy, centrality, warmth, light and, in the case of Group 1, inspiring art work on the walls of their gallery venue, acted to dampen anxieties or disturbances such as the constantly changing attendance at meetings by providing a consistency to the group experience. Uncomfortable surroundings or encounters with a caretaker jangling their keys, may have amplified disturbances causing the group to look for ways to change and adapt. In Look Group 7 (the second negative case) who decided to stop meeting, positive feedback loops in relation to their meeting environment drove the group to seek out three different spaces before settling on meeting in a member's home. This then became a case of over adaptation as the environment became only suitable or accessible for the existing membership which eventually led to the group ending its activities. As I will explain in the conclusion to this chapter, the feedback loop is the signal to the system to move on to the next stage on the cycle of participation – a path which sees equilibrium achieved in a state of community through a balance between formalising (order) and retreat (chaos).

Section 3: Joining in and Isolation

The processes described in Chapter 8's themes of joining in and of isolation and insularity seem to point to oppositional dynamics. The forces which bring people together and through which people become isolated may be one and the same process but emergent from different neighbouring systems. In contrast to the qualitative analysis which maintained a distinction between joining in and isolation/insularity, this chapter sees these processes as two sides of the same whole. The data cites numerous examples of people and information joining systems and leaving them. The first thing that this points to is the openness of systems and the permeability of boundaries allowing the system to be in perpetual interaction with its environment. The qualitative analysis in Chapter 8 suggested that for both joining in and isolation there were active and passive distinctions. Active joining in, like volunteering an opinion or taking public office was contrasted with more passive forms of participation such as listening or looking. And actively seeking isolation such as the migration from a city patterns described were contrasted with passive retreat where barriers like a lack of local knowledge prevent an individual from joining in. My reflections on the importance of the venue in facilitating face-to-face contact and the differentiation of roles within the group, point to the importance of both active and passive participation. This then links to ideas of sameness and difference which I will return to in the following section. Before this, I wish to focus on system and environmental conditions making participation and retreat possible. The fact that humans have foresight and choice means we can choose whether and when to participate. We also have access to technology and digital infrastructure which make our environments for participation potentially global

as well as local. We have access to transport which is particularly significant for these results from a region wide programme conducted in rural and peripheral conditions and which picked up strong migration and geographical isolation themes. We can also connect virtually to people, and information through the internet. This use of technology has assisted human social systems in the rapid formation of weak, interdependent connections²⁸⁸ but at the same time it has assisted in a retreat from physical, community and environmental interaction. We watch television at home, Skype our friends overseas and tweet to total strangers on our smartphones whilst we never see our neighbours or use our shared community facilities like the pub or village hall. Complexity theory allows the analysis to switch between and reflect on the connections between these layers of micro to macro states because it makes an assumption of non-linear dynamics²⁸⁹. An input having an amplified effect demands a viewpoint that can move between different layers of a hierarchy. The micro processes that are observable through the Look Group data and which relate to the formation of a sustainable community are the dyadic interactions. These then form more complex structures through group participation.

In considering the micro level, I return here to the idea of how we recognise and analyse social systems. Smith's theory that the units of analysis are care-giving dyads²⁹⁰ is of particular interest. The infant and caregiver example Smith provides is a model of this active and passive relationship. The infant will give off distress signals and the caregiver is bound by simple biological rules which

²⁸⁸ Urry, J (2007) p 272 has a detailed and eloquent description of these connections from a mobility perspective

²⁸⁹ Smith, T. (1997) p 57

²⁹⁰ Ibid

make them stop and listen in order to respond correctly²⁹¹. There is a degree of concentration and focus which is needed to maintain that relationship. Both individuals are attuned to one another at the exclusion of their neighbours. The active and passive roles of these two individuals are maintained (boundary) to ensure the two can be differentiated. In this human example, differentiation of role is required when the caregiver needs to impose authority or introduce boundaries. From a systems perspective this distinction in identity is necessary for stability and sustainability. If the system cannot differentiate itself from another system it merges into it; its identity and meaning are lost. The building blocks of family and then community can be seen as these active and passive communicative acts. This communicative behaviour is viewed at higher macro levels through ideas of participation and retreat; of joining in and becoming isolated. Participation in activity like the Look Group offers a means for the agents of a system to find sameness and difference in communication. It provides the means to find someone to talk to; and someone to listen to.

The active and passive communication is observable in the learning activity but the opening of the discussion into a group activity creates more complexity. The Look Group model provides simple means for the members to negotiate this complexity when they first join the group. The formality of the meetings (routine, turn taking, preparation) provides a focus that creates unity and boundary whilst the informality (unpredictable, voluntary, unassessed and personal) ensures the boundary is open to new ideas. The opening of the dialogue into a three-way or more conversation allows more than one person to be the audience which facilitates the non-verbal communication that ensures organic authority to

²⁹¹ Here I am simplifying Smith's biological account of arousal-modulation (Ibid) as a means to create the foundations of a philosophical or computational model of dyadic interaction.

emerge. It also helps the members to fathom old and create the new unwritten rules of this and other related social situations (tacit learning, processes of social capital). A Tate interviewee talked about the Look Group project challenging the binary relationship that visitors to a gallery have with curators and education staff by creating a triangular structure with the art work²⁹². This behaviour was also observable in the meetings with the art becoming part of the conversation. Looking at the art is both an active and a passive experience for the Look Group members and both processes facilitate non-formal learning about the art, artist or ideas and tacit learning about the group's dynamics, personal taste or broader societal responses to the aesthetics or meaning.

Section 4: Sameness and Difference

Within this theme were ideas of insiders and outsiders, of artists and audience. These identities were never fixed and were perceived by the observer. This Complexity analysis will apply the concepts of path dependency and co-evolution to a narrative of Tate's perceived identity as an outsider. The narrative shows how this identity was adopted by the organisation and the community both actively and passively and how it then influenced subsequent interaction with communities in Cornwall. Woven within the narrative are glimpses of the artist identities explored – as civiliser, border crosser and representator.

Durie and Wyatt interpreted the isolation felt by different groups in their study of community health, evidenced by cycles of locked-in behaviour as the result of a decline in weak connections²⁹³. The brief history of Tate's relationship with its

²⁹² TS2 – quote appears Appendix 2 Section 1.2

²⁹³ Durie, R. & Wyatt, K. (2007) p 1934

local community presented in Appendix 1 mirrors this example closely and here Tate's history of being "on the back foot with some people"²⁹⁴ is re-analysed as three iterations of cyclical locked-in behaviour. Tate's behaviour as an 'outsider' is not just attributable to its size and vertical hierarchical structure in contrast to the informal horizontal connections of the community. It could also be argued that the locked-in behaviour is that of the community who *perceive* Tate as the outsider. As the description below using historical sources will attest – "the community" was continually changing its identity through the influx of new residents. The evidence²⁹⁵ here suggests that the actions of the organisation followed cyclical patterns which positioned Tate at the edge of the system. The distinctive outsider behaviour has its origins in the relationship between the artists and indigenous community in the St Ives artist colony and appears to move through different iterations. The first cycle sees artists and their accompanying creative class moving to St Ives throughout the post-war period. The community is able to absorb these incomers into the population as the decline in the fishing industry has left vacant properties for artist studios and holiday homes. The community appears to settle, forming new groups and associations to meet the needs and interests of a diversifying population. But these competing interest groups had different ideas and when a group of art enthusiasts began planning a gallery to celebrate the artistic heritage of the town, a rival campaign group sprang up to make the case for a public swimming pool. It would be over simplifying to say that there was a clean division along insider/outsider lines between those who wanted an art gallery and those that wanted a swimming pool as suggested by one interviewee. The divisions in the

²⁹⁴ Cornwall Council interviewee

²⁹⁵ Documentary evidence Axten, J. (1995); Interview with Cornwall council officer; focus group contributions and own reflections.

community were far more complex. As well as the leisure centre proposal, there was the group of retailers who thought public funding should be spent on improvements to a sewage scheme and those who argued for more housing for the elderly. Even those who supported the gallery proposal were divided in opinion as to what period of St Ives art should be on display²⁹⁶. But the source of these multiplying divisions – what a Complexity perspective would term a bifurcation point²⁹⁷ – was the proposal to build a gallery. The invitation to Tate to be part of the project places the organisation within one of these competing groups and the high proportion of incomers (artists, migrants) and outsiders (County councillors, public funders) creates an identity of distinction for the new gallery. Tate was thus an outsider by association and because the local knowledge of the complexity of opposition lacked detail.

The second iteration involved a new wave of artists, art lovers and lifestyle migrants moving to St Ives and a dramatic increase in tourism as a result of Tate St Ives providing a year-round reason to visit the town. In dealing with a growing business and with staff turnover, Tate retreated from the groups who helped found the gallery, whilst the strain on the gallery building from unprecedented visitor numbers led to the exploration of options for expansion. The selection of a car park as the development site precipitated another critical point in relationships with the community, with large-scale opposition organised within the community. The focus of the hostility is not just the choice of site and the loss of parking but the more general deterioration of communication with groups in the town. Following lengthy negotiation with the community, the town

²⁹⁶ Axten, J. (1995) p 151

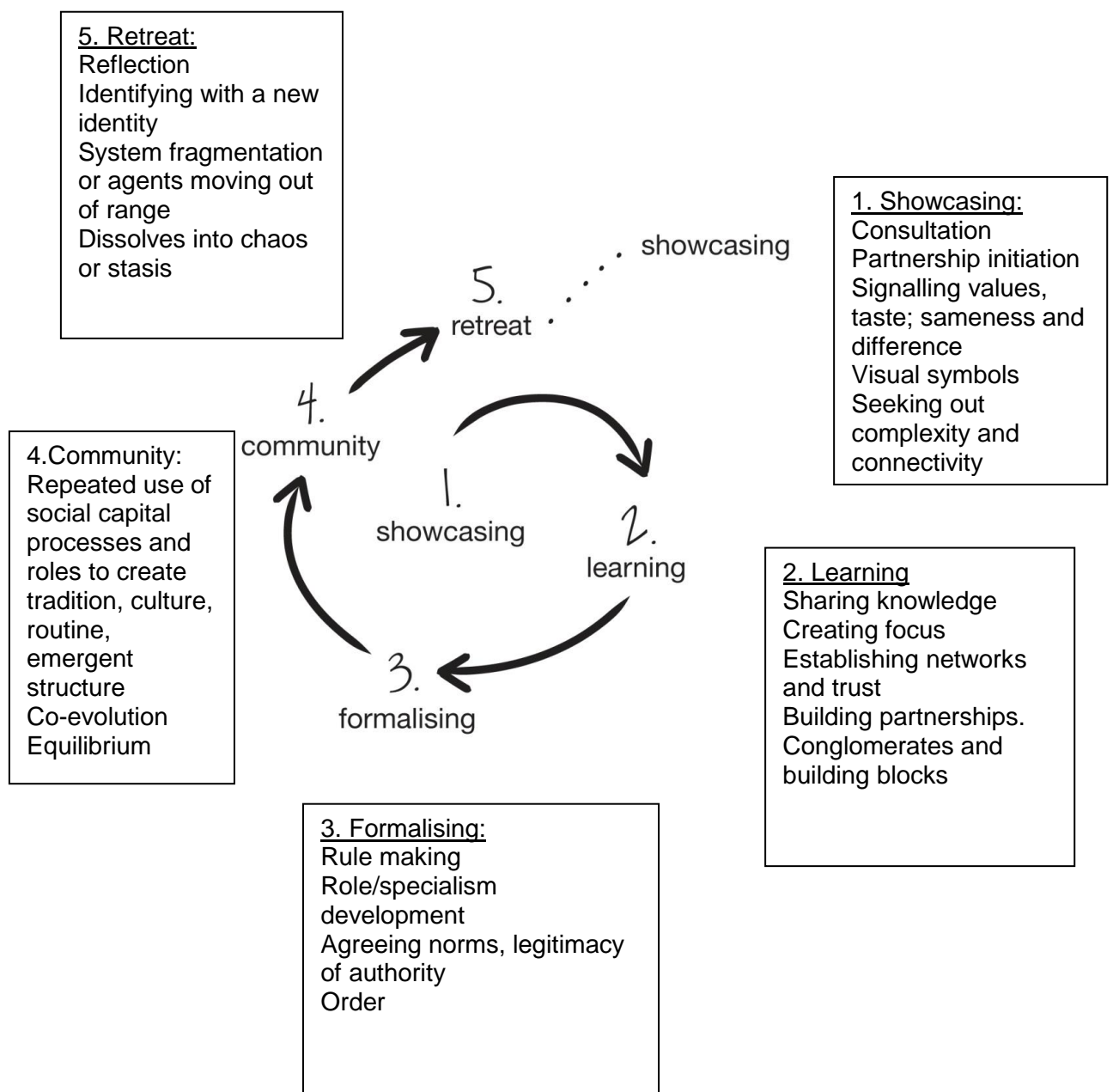
²⁹⁷ Byrne, D (1998) p 6

and county councils agree to support the development on an alternative site which allows Tate to move forward with its plans for expansion.

The final iteration sees Tate formalising a programme of activity across Cornwall which attracts a similar population of incomers and outsiders. The Look Group Network project was then borne out the negotiations with Cornwall Council which secured the land for the gallery extension. It marks a new cycle of relationships with the community which are recognised as being proactive rather than reactive and which create opportunities for dialogue with the gallery rather than closing them down. Some remnants of the old behaviour persist. When issues arise over the group meeting in a venue which Tate did not approve of and rumours begin circulating throughout the network, the response from Tate is to retreat and not answer questions about it. But the relationship within the town has been dramatically improved. I no longer see the organisation “on the back foot” with regards to the Phase Two expansion project. What has changed to improve this relationship?

My attempt to model some of the system’s dynamics through this history, are captured using the Ebb and Flow cycle (Figure 7). The purpose of describing in detail these three iterations of cyclical behaviour is to show how the complexity of the project is evident in its history and how this has contributed to its current behaviour. It also shows how far the history may have to be traced and the level of microscopic relations needed to observe pattern and from thence to identifying the rules or conditions which make this possible.

Figure 7: The Ebb and Flow Cycle revisited



Returning to the idea of sameness and difference, the cycle suggests that the reason that Tate St Ives was constantly out of step with the community was because as outsiders, they did not have sufficient weak connections to allow

information about the informal rules of community to flow into the system. The organisation had to adapt to the community and this involved a time-delay whilst the information was absorbed (passive) and spread to throughout the organisation (to decision makers in London) and an adaptive response was decided upon (active). The more organised Tate becomes in relation to its community the slower the response becomes. The community is able to adapt more quickly to the changes – capitalising on tourism for example -because of the weak connections allowing information to flow freely. The distinction which Marten makes between co-adaptation and co-evolution (Chapter 2) is helpful here as it suggestive of a different time frame. Co-adaptive change (fitting together) is a response to an environmental trigger whereas co-evolutionary change (growing together) happens concurrently²⁹⁸. Tate is able to begin growing together with its community once it begins – through its intensive programme of community outreach – developing weak connections which make it share a greater degree of sameness with the community and helps to facilitate the flow of information. Holland speculates that by understanding the origins of signal/boundary hierarchies, we can gain understanding of how to “steer” complex adaptive systems²⁹⁹. He describes the relationship between signal and boundary in creating new complexity and specialisms: signals influence the formation of new boundaries and new boundaries influence the signals³⁰⁰. As more boundaries form, specialisms develop amongst the systems agents relating to how information is passed within and outside of the system. Holland gives the example of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nation’s* pin factory as an analogy

²⁹⁸ Marten, G. (2001) p 99

²⁹⁹ Holland, J. (2012) p 1

³⁰⁰ Holland, J. (2012) p 89

for specialist communication chains³⁰¹. This perspective begins to assist in the understanding of the specialist role which the artist assumes in the different manifestations of community presented through the case study. The artist's specialism is in signalling. The artist has experience and perhaps even training to create visual, audio or performative signals. These create boundaries, for example between performer and audience which in turn precipitate a chain of signals from the environment (for example members of the community wanting to join or cluster with the artist, as seen in the rarefying of the artist identify in the Look Groups) or a more passive demand for information (for example people looking for meaning in displays of art). Signal/boundary systems co-evolve – the process of boundary creating signal and vice-versa is co-evolutionary. Another example of co-evolution from the data is the dependency relationship between the Look Groups and Tate described in Chapter 8. Self-organisation on the part of the network have allowed the groups to send strong signals, which Tate have responded to by creating boundaries. The “rules” about how and whether groups received funding for venues is one boundary but another is creating the new programme of activity which will see the Look Groups re-positioned as a consultative body for the gallery. Both show the two systems growing and evolving together.

³⁰¹ Ibid p 17

Chapter conclusion

The challenge in writing this analysis has been in trying to maintain the complexity of the project and the data and not to simplify the phenomena under scrutiny whilst also considering the presentation of the analysis within the confines of a conventional thesis chapter. Chapter 5's qualitative simplification of the conditions for Look Group sustainability appeared at first too rigid for the messy, dynamic and interdependent set of processes which the case study illustrates. The identification of the supra condition of non-linearity for the sustainability of the Look Group project does assist in understanding the root cause of many of the experiences which the data documents. The asymmetry in power is both real and perceived. Tate is a national organisation with expertise and resources beyond the means of most community organisations in Cornwall. But the Look Groups are many in number and location and have the local knowledge of both the membership and place which may have more value than artistic authority or finances. However the failure of the groups to connect to other parts of the network – through the Ning or because of the “primeval struggle of hierarchies”³⁰² experienced at the Look Group Day organised by Tate – means that the use of this network of knowledge is never fully utilised. Authority and control appear shifting, fleeting or latent which helps to account for unpredictable behaviour like the self-organisation of membership. The Look Groups use their weak connections to attract a balance of sameness and difference, the active and the passive communicators, the artists and the audience to develop identities for the groups which reference their history. Members reinvest the knowledge they acquire through meetings into future activity making connections between artists and movements for example and

³⁰² Look Group 3 – see Chapter 7.

reinforcing a collective memory which creates a sense of belonging and mental health benefits. The venue and the co-ordinator play a pivotal role in facilitating feedback and maintaining the membership levels and consistency of activity at the edge of chaos where the group achieves its sustainability.

The understanding of the underlying dynamics of the surviving Look Groups has relied on detailed documentation and analysis of micro interactions at dyadic, small group and community level. Within these different the same kinds of patterns appear repeatedly within these nested systems. The dyadic relationships are particularly used for recruiting members and adding diversity to the group. The group then has an optimal number of 8 through which focus can be maintained to facilitate different kinds of learning and formalising but with a greater range of different view points. Community is formed through a network of dyadic and group interactions and communications through which knowledge is continually flowing and being recycled as causal inputs into the system

The advantage which Complexity Theory has over other analytical approaches to community dynamics, explored in Chapter 1 such as Social Capital, is its potential to connect to much larger patterns of behaviour across the universe. These patterns transcend boundaries of species and can be observed within biological, natural and social systems. A Complexity approach is compatible with Social capital - which can be seen as the emergent products of self-organisation made possible by numerous strong and weak community relationships - but this is relying on just one category of conditions for sustainability. Through a focus on the micro relationships within a system and their interaction with the external environment, a Complexity approach has the

potential to explore underlying dynamics of collective behaviour which extend beyond the idea of community being the combination of different aspirations of rational individuals.

Section 4 of this chapter included a detailed narrative of cyclical behaviour which I wish to illustrate using the cycle introduced in Chapter 4. The labels draw the reader's attention to the links made between different phenomena, concepts and processes in order to claim the cycle as a recurring pattern which has application to other sustainable community studies and which explains the underlying dynamics of this sustainable community/public sector partnership. The cycle demonstrates that in the case of Tate's relationship with the community in St Ives, the retreat from community communication occurred before learning or formalising which led to a breakdown in the relationship. In the final iteration of behaviour described, the programme of community consultation created a very public and explicit form of learning and formalising which agreed (and documented) the shared values and aspirations of the gallery and the community allowing a new positive relationship to emerge. The cycle is also applicable to the stages which the Look Groups appear to navigate. In the first stage individuals come together to showcase artistic and aesthetic taste, their political and social values, education, relationship with Cornwall and different institutions within their communities. Here the importance of symbols and visual clues appeared most important. There is also a showcasing on the part of Tate whereby their curatorial expertise, taste and brand values are also expressed at an individual and organisational level. In the second stage the newly formed system begins learning together. Here the resources of the group are put to use – shared knowledge (sameness) is used

first and then as norms, networks and trust (social capital processes) within the group are established, unique knowledge (difference) is brought from the different edges of the communicative system and new knowledge (novelty, emergence) is created. The formalising stage (3) may not be necessary in simpler forms of the group (smaller numbers of members or if there is already a strong sameness that makes this stage redundant; the rules, hierarchies are already shared and there are high levels of trust) but if it does occur this is where the group lays out its rules, terms of reference and makes explicit its goals. Formalising then moves into community (4): a much more informal stage where rules are tested, traditions repeated, new structures emerge which send shockwaves (perturbations of information or meaning) through the system. This is the stable attractor on the edge of chaos. The community is poised between returning to a formalising stage where more structure is introduced which could lead to stasis or retreat. The retreat (5) is less well documented in this data. The experiences of members who have retreated from other systems – the city for example – are described and the two negative cases provide some material for analysis. If the agents cannot re-join or find a new system through the process of showcasing then they remain isolated and in a chaotic state. Factors of ageing and mobility are relevant here as they influence the ability of isolated individuals to join in.

In a complex system like this with different hierarchies – individual members, groups, the network – different parts of the system may be negotiating different stages of the cycle at the same time. There is no uniform transition from one stage to the next and the system may get stuck or move backwards. The point of the cycle is to capture and simplify stages which appear to be present in

those groups who are sustainable. The cycle allows the research participants to reflect on the different types of behaviour which have held the groups together and which may influence their future sustainability. The Ebb and Flow cycle also points to the ways in which simple modelling could assist in the collection and sharing of complex social data sets, which I explore in the concluding chapter.

Chapter 7: Discussion of Findings

Chapter introduction

The first part of this chapter will return to the research questions presented in the introduction, synthesising all the empirical results with the wide ranging policy and theoretical material reviewed to present robust and evidenced answers to these areas of inquiry:

- 1) What are the conditions which support the sustainability of the Look Groups?
- 2) How does the research contribute to the micro understanding of community sustainability?
- 3) To what extent does Complexity Theory offer a theoretical lens that assists in the understanding of dynamic conditions for community sustainability and the possibility of their transferability to other communities?

The second part of the chapter will discuss the validity of the findings.

Section 1: The Research Findings

Question 1: What are the conditions which support the sustainability of the Look groups?

Before considering the conditions, it is important to relate this question to the broader concerns of this study: community and sustainability and to explore the degree to which the Look Groups are communities in their own right and to what extent they are sustainable. This question relates to the results gleaned from more general questions posed to the participants about their perspectives on community and sustainability. There were close comparisons made between

the sustainable conditions present and the dynamics of a Look Group and the respondents' views on sustainable community conditions and dynamics. The idea of community hubs – pub quizzes, community associations, village festivals - being defining characteristics of communities – echoed the positive experiences members articulated about being part of Look Groups. Those participants that made a direct connection between my general questions about community sustainability and my interest in the Look Groups were not sure that the groups really constituted a community. This, however, was more to do with the political implications of the label “community”. It was, they believed “a loaded expression”³⁰³ and there were also concerns that community was not an area of public life which Tate should be getting involved with. The benefits of a Complexity approach, as Question 3 asserts, is in removing these ideological or personal views on the concept of community to observe underlying processes which are present in a collective activity.

Throughout the literature and policy on community and informal and sustainable community learning, the ideas of meeting face-to-face and forming communities of interest or practice with a shared focus or goal are prevalent. In this way the Look Groups can be viewed as communication communities, communities of practice, learning communities and cornerstones of the Big Society. The political and economic environment which spawned the Big Society – austerity, neo-liberal ideology and localism – were also relevant to the design of the Look Group project. The Tate interviewees described the model as responding to economic and policy decisions at both a national and local level. From this perspective, it could be argued that the conditions identified in the sustainability of the Look Groups are already observable in numerous areas of policy and

³⁰³ Quote from Look Group 1; theme also surfaced in Look Group 3,4 and 5.

research and are therefore transferable to other communities. But digging deeper into the specificity of this multi-layered public sector-community partnership project and revisiting the Cornwall context reveals unique qualities in the regional setting for this programme which either required a particular set of conditions to survive or which facilitated access to a specific set of conditions. The presence of a national art gallery working in a rural region with an aspiration to work with its local communities is particular to Cornwall. The large population of artists and lifestyle migrants is another unique element. Rurality and the dispersal of population were challenges to some individuals joining in and the access to diversity of membership but the ways in which the network overcame such issues – for example through car sharing – also contributed to the sustainability of the group by forming deeper personal connections and friendships.

In considering the conditions which support the sustainability of the group, a process of drilling down to the underlying processes in the thematised data, reduced the complexity of the project to four interdependent categories: structure, resources, connectivity and diversity.

Structure refers to the rules, routine and formality of the group. Structure was observed through those elements which were introduced by Tate at the beginning of the project such as the visual art focus and suggestions around numbers of participants, the role of the co-ordinator and facilitator and meeting in a public venue. The data also referred to those emergent structures which had been created through the interactions within the groups and between the groups and their environment. These included the ongoing learning “curriculum” and learning styles, the identification of new meeting spaces and

the maintenance of an optimum membership pool. Structure gave the groups an identity and focus which held them together - a boundary of “sameness” which I observed from my different visits to the groups. Each group sat in a circle formation, visual materials were present in every meeting and the meetings were conducted through the means of talking and listening. The members were enthusiastic in their view that this was a new kind of experience, distinct from other forms of adult learning they had or were taking part in. Emergent structure gave the different groups their own individuality from the rest of the network and this was observed through the homemade cake that starts each meeting of Look Group 2 to the democratically introduced formality in Look Group 5.

In some instances the simple structures got progressively more complex as feedback loops amplified inaccurate information and caused instability. The confusion over alternative venues and meeting at home illustrated this unnecessary complexity. The results illustrate the difficulties that Tate experienced in achieving a balance between re-communicating the simple rules needed to maintain the structure and avoiding micro-intervention that created macro level expectations or anxiety from the rest of the network. These patterns are also observable in the examples given by the Cornwall Council interviewees where the respondents described the difficulty in growing community resilience without creating dependency.

Resources were the material assets, knowledge and skills which the groups and the network have access to and which appear significant to their longevity. The most referenced resources were the venue and the co-ordinator who, the Complexity analysis revealed, are essential in the formation of and maintenance

of feedback loops which ensure different forms of information reach all parts of the system. The significance of the venue emphasised the need for warmth, heat and light for human interaction but also in allowing face-to-face contact through which non-verbal communication can be expressed, learned and responded to. This contributes to the dispersal of power within the group and the organic way in which the co-ordinator role has developed. The Ning, whilst exhibiting great potential in its ability to add additional support to the groups through resource sharing amongst the network, served to reinforce the importance of face-to-face contact for the members. The lack of engagement with the facility illustrates how dyadic active and passive communicative acts, the building blocks of sustainable social systems, rely on other signals apart from language. These facial and bodily gestures which appear so crucial are shared with other species, hinting again at areas where, through a Complexity perspective, the social and biological sciences can together articulate shared patterns.

Connectivity was the means through which the groups were able to reproduce themselves. Each group reported the recruitment of new members through word-of-mouth. Without the connection to a wider network of “like-minded” individuals the groups would not have been able to survive. This wider network was formed through existing friendships, professional connections and learning acquaintances (particularly those connected with art) and through Tate’s public outreach activity. The dynamics by which like-mindedness was constituted was therefore complex. It could not be reduced to “simple” ideas of identity like social class, education, age or gender and was more closely related to the idea of common purpose or practice. Collective memory was an important

component of this connectivity. If the group could remember and make connections between different artists or the individual preferences, it not only created a shared resource to draw on for future discussions but also a means to develop links into new areas of learning. It had a history and a possible future. Connectivity was also related to the physical mobility of the network. All the members had the ability to travel to the meetings either by foot or car or could gain access to transport via another group member. In a region of dispersed communities where public transport is limited and fuel is expensive, this physical connectivity appeared significant and pointed to ways in which greater diversity could be achieved.

Diversity was a finely nuanced and group specific concept which related to the ability to introduce novelty to the membership and discussions through some form of difference. Although I have argued that the sameness and connectivity which are requirements to keep the Look Groups together cannot be simplified through descriptions of identity, the groups highlighted some visible differences like age or gender as possible sources of diversity. Other distinctions would really only emerge through a deeper engagement in a focussed discussion. These differences were of opinion and values and required trust and a degree of confidence to assert. Artists – professional, art-educated or enthusiastic amateurs were highlighted throughout the groups as bringing diversity of knowledge to the groups. But the role of the non-experts was also considered important. These were the audience who could question or challenge the authority of the artists or the art institution through their fresh perspective.

The point about mobility highlighted in the discussion about connectivity above, raises the issue of how physical access might also help to add diversity to the

groups. If a high proportion of members were reliant on cars to access the meetings, future iterations of Look Group activity may need to focus on ensuring those without private transport can join in.

From a Complexity perspective, the underlying dynamics of sustainability, made possible by these conditions, is of survival through self organisation. Self organisation happens spontaneously through the micro interactions between agents or adaptively through triggers from the environment. From a sustainable development perspective which presents sustainability as an achievement of a balance of environmental, social and economic conditions, the Look Groups can be seen to exhibit social sustainability. Economic sustainability is a priority for the Look Group partners Tate and Cornwall Council in response to the political climate of austerity and public spending cuts. The shared environment for partners and participants is thus socially constructed – the classroom, art gallery, discussions focussing on financial constraints – and this perhaps accounts for the lack of connection to the natural environment which I explore in the closing remarks to this chapter.

Question 2: How does the research contribute to the micro understanding of community sustainability?

*The goal before us is to understand complexity. To achieve that, we must move beyond structure and topology and start focusing on the dynamics that take place along the links. Networks are only the skeleton of complexity, the highways for the various processes that make our world hum. To describe society we must dress the links of the social network with actual dynamical interactions between people.*³⁰⁴

In chapter 2 I outlined the political context for a study of community sustainability and the informal learning case study through a review of relevant

³⁰⁴ Barabási, A-L, (2002) p 225

UK and worldwide policy including sustainable development. The chapter concluded that whilst the three pillars of sustainability highlight the interconnectedness and interdependence of environment, society and economy and UK sustainable community policy rightly used these tenets as founding principles, the policy field was predominantly overseeing spatial planning and construction. The chapter also revealed how the sustainable community has been eschewed by politicians over the course of the last parliament leaving a void where once there was potential for greater joined up thinking in community interventions. The space which a community occupies and the physical environment are clearly important for its survival as the theme of Resources from the data made clear, but an understanding of how to promote positive group dynamics needs to play a more prominent role in policy making and in public sector interactions at a community level. The research has responded to Barabasi's plea to populate the abstract notions of networks and connections and through the deep immersion in the case study using Participant Observation which has exposed the patterns of micro interactions which contribute to the survival of community. The Ebb and Flow cycle is a summary representation of the themes which surfaced in the data, the types of activities named by both participants and commentators quoted in the literature review and the conditions which were identified as contributing to the sustainability of the groups. It maps the life cycle of community participation from joining together to dispersal. In its most micro form it would illustrate a cycle of sustained dyadic communication – the basic building blocks of community. The data presented here also suggests its application to small groups and a networked community. The cycle is observable thus as an adaptive feedback loop or series of connected adaptive feedback loops which transform responses

from the group to their environment or internal dynamics into new behaviours. It is also an illustration of a continuum of sustainability from initial connection through to community or dispersal.

Dyadic

Dyadic active and passive communicative acts are crucial in showcasing stage of community participation and may play a role in the prevention or facilitation of the retreat. The recruitment of new LG members in particular relied on this personalised word of mouth recommendation and introduction to the group.

Small Groups

A larger number of participants facilitates the degree of diversity needed to create interest and learning but legitimise the need for focus, formality and order. The data identified an optimal number of 8 participants and that role specialisms such as boundary signaller (often the artist) and rules emerged from these small group interactions.

Networked community

Though understood in policy terms as a micro level, the networked community could contain thousands of nested small groups all with overlapping interests and concerns. Each small group holds the unwritten, informal rules of community life. Dyads who bridge different groups, form the building blocks of a network through which knowledge and trust can be shared.

Question 3: To what extent does Complexity Theory provide a means for developing a theoretical understanding of sustainable community dynamics and of the dynamics of successfully transferring these conditions to other communities?

The first part of the question I will begin to answer by returning to my appraisal of social capital as a theory for understanding the sustainable community. Many of the criticisms and limitations of social capital could also be levelled at Complexity Theory. The reliance on metaphors, circular definitions and challenges in measurement in social contexts are relevant to both approaches as is the fact that self-organisation can yield similar effects to the “dark side” of social capital as I explore in Section 2. My attraction to the metaphors of Complexity Theory, from a community research perspective, lies in the ability to introduce ideas of interdependence and interdisciplinarity. From testing the metaphor of the bird flock with the Look Groups (see Appendix 4) I was able to observe the different connections and comparisons the participants made between the flocking behaviour, following of simple rules, interaction between the flock and the environment. These discussions then progressed to questions of what other research might help them understand their experiences. This process of questioning, facilitated by imagery and models, mirrored the principles which the Look Groups have been following in making connections between and art movements and artists, between the lives of the artists and place and time which allow the learning to be democratic and to organise itself. Complexity is thus a paradigm which fits neatly with the practice of the Look Groups and offered a means to continue dialogue on a level playing field.

Beyond the Look Groups and my academic community, I have become aware of increasing numbers of people who are using Complexity in their professional and day-to-day lives to make sense of work, community and family life. Through

my current professional appointment I have been working with the Cornwall Sustainable Tourism Network (CoaST) and Volunteer Cornwall, the directors of which are both employing Complexity thinking to their internal strategising and in explicit participatory activities with communities in Cornwall. In contrast to this, a non-academic friend recently posted to her social media page a post about entropy which explained why she always has to pick up her son's socks. Complexity provides a set of metaphors which open up thinking about the interdependence of seemingly unrelated areas of public life and point to productive and creative boundaries where different disciplines meet – such as the social and biological sciences.

In assessing the advantage of Complexity theory in understanding the possibility of transferring sustainability to other communities, I first point to the way in which a Complexity lens removes ideological or normative connotations of the concept of community identified in the previous question. From this perspective, the Look Groups and communities are both viewed as complex adaptive systems with many dynamic agents interacting with each other and with an environment through a permeable boundary. Both social systems thus have the same underlying dynamics: agents seek other agents because they are a source of sameness and difference through which equilibrium between chaos and stasis can be achieved. Complex structures are also the source of information flowing through the system from the environment through feedback loops and agent specialisms. The Ebb and Flow cycle illustrates these feedback loops.

As I outlined in Chapter 6, the fact that the Look Groups had an external designer makes them distinct from more organic forms of community and this

means that the initial conditions for the project can be identified with greater precision. The four categories of conditions could form a check-list or tool kit for arts organisations or community development workers to use to design a replica programme. Tate have already developed a manual to support existing groups and the creation of new groups with this in mind. With the ongoing support of the organisation who hold the Look Group vision and the experiences and feedback coming from the groups, this formalisation of the rules and routine of Look Group activity may help to reproduce the existing structures though it may inhibit transformation to more a sustainable and independent model. As well as the contextual specifics outlined previously, a Complexity lens offers insight into the transferability of these conditions beyond this specific context. Whilst many of the respondents, particularly Tate interviewees had ambitions that the programme be rolled out in different areas or with different partners, a Complexity perspective would err caution. Throughout the analysis, I have emphasised that the supra condition for the positive self-organising qualities of the groups are the non-linear systems dynamics. These dynamics will always entail unpredictable results as there is a disproportional relationship between cause and effect. Giving a partner gallery a list of requirements for setting up a Look Group, may therefore be a useful starting point in a discussion about how to create the conditions for self-organisation, but should not be asserted as a fail-safe means to replicate a sustainable model.

Section 2: Research validity

As the methodology chapter explored, participant observation is a process of deep immersion within a community. The original methods were designed to

explore and highlight distinctions and to document unique or original practices. The approach is thereby focussed and to a degree inward looking. The quality and internal validity of the data collected will depend on the relationships which the researcher is able to establish with the participants, the extent to which he or she crosses the line between observing and participating and, crucially, how they account for their position in relation to the research participants in the documentation of the study. I believe my study achieved a good balance between establishing rapport and trust with the participants in order to fully document and analyse their experiences maintained objectivity and reflected on those experiences or values which I held which could have influenced my methods or assumptions. The overview of the four conditions which support the sustainability of the Look Groups and the five stages of community participation illustrated by the Ebb and Flow cycle help to categorise the kind of experience I have documented through this research process. The study has therefore been inductive; developing theory from the results which may be tested in different contexts and thus achieve a degree of external validity. The simplification of the complexity of the project may belie the particularities of the context – the institutions, geography and people of Cornwall and their connections and interdependence with the prevailing economic and political environment. It may also be the case that the particular kind of learning on a visual art theme and the high proportion of artists is also significant and may limit the application of the methodology beyond this project. The immersion within the system through participant observation and the careful documentation of the views of the partners, Look Group members and the relationship between both groups and between participants and researcher all help to define the research phenomenon. My knowledge of the community development literature and of

the requirements on cultural organisations to demonstrate the social impact of their activity at a community level suggests that even within a more focussed cultural and arts sector there will be relevance for this research and I explore this further in Chapter 8.

Chapter conclusion

I began the research with an interest in understanding the dynamics of community sustainability and with a hypothesis that the informal learning groups which form the Look Group Network might behave in the same ways as a community and thus present an interesting and easily manageable case study. Right from the outset the terms of reference were challenging as the contextual research revealed just how politically charged the expressions “community” and “sustainable” have become. The research needed some kind of grounding in the political and policy sphere to give definition to the study and relate it to a body of existing literature. However, the additional analysis using Complexity Theory shows the potential for the in-depth case study using participant observation in uncovering micro group dynamics. When the political and ideological terminology is removed and we perceive a community as a complex adaptive system who survive through adaptation and self organisation, the patterns of nested communicative acts can be revealed: the dyad, the small group and the community.

Chapter 8: Conclusions and recommendations

Chapter Introduction

The overarching aim of this research project was to inquire into the underlying dynamics which contribute to the sustainability of communities. The means for doing this, required situating together informal learning, community and sustainability and exploring their interdependence through the case study of the Look Group Project. The breadth of the topic under investigation has led to research within multiple fields: sustainable development, informal learning and education, community and complex adaptive systems as well as an examination of the context and the project partners: Cornwall, Tate and Cornwall Council. This thesis therefore has contributions to make to more than one field of research. My main contribution is to the literature on community sustainability, through a detailed case study using a deep, qualitative and iterative methodology which analyses the dynamic processes of a multi-layered community-public sector partnership project. The originality of my contribution lies in the application of Complexity theory to the empirical data to enable an understanding of the systemic dynamics that contribute to sustainability. Through the development and application of the Ebb and Flow cycle I make a contribution to the development of method in consideration of group and community dynamics. I have also documented relationships and histories of community and institutions – provided in Appendices 1-3 that contribute to contemporary understandings of Cornwall and which may prove useful additions to the Cornish Studies literature.

This final chapter outlines the implications of the research through an assessment of potential applications for the methodology, presents the limitations of the research, make links between this study and further areas of scholarship and finally makes recommendations to the Project participants based on the results and literature reviewed for this study.

Section 1: Potential applications of the methodology

The Ebb and Flow model is an illustration of micro community dynamics informed by Complexity Theory and based on observations of different levels of a multi-partner adult informal learning project. The cycle and indeed each stage of the cycle is an adaptive feedback loop with responses being fed back into the system to move it on to a new state or way of behaving. The Ebb and Flow cycle offers two potential applications for different stakeholder groups. For communities, it is a participatory mapping device. The cycle provides a means for communities to understand different stages or categories of micro relations which appear to have a hierarchy or order. The device is very simple and designed for community insiders themselves to make use of with or without the intervention of an academic outsider. However, through the consideration of two major theoretical approaches within its design: Social Capital and Complexity Theory, the Ebb and flow model is also offered as tool for research design and data analysis for the academic study of sustainable (or resilient or complex adaptive or social capital rich) communities. The model offers a framework through which to plan fieldwork particularly employing iterative strategies to data collection and to analyse and present results to both academic peers and the general public. The underpinning of different stages of

the cycle with the principles of Complexity Theory (phase transitions from chaos to order to chaos again) offers an additional layer of understanding with the potential to link community studies with other academic or political research areas.

I am planning to apply the principles in my current assignment documenting the impact of cultural expression (in particular arts festivals) at a community level as part of an Arts Council funded cultural tourism programme. I will be analysing the qualitative data gathered through similar data collection methods as this study and testing to what degree volunteer participation in the running of these community festivals follows the five ordered stages of the Ebb and Flow cycle and identifying along the way the micro conditions of connectivity, resources, diversity and structure.

My second planned application of the methodology is to explore how a qualitative approach might be used to inform the development of a metric framework to quantitatively measure the impact of micro connections in community sustainability. Maps of connectivity to hubs, for example, or showing the relationship between different stages of cyclical behaviour and time and space could be visually represented to show comparisons in patterning across different contexts. Modelling would provide a means to quantify some of the micro interactions which create these macro emergent structures. The public management sphere to which this research project relates continually seeks to quantify the impact of intervention through metrics such as return on investment but this is usually at the expense of the real experience of participants where numbers replace meaning. My case study data has sufficient breadth to observe patterns through which to create models but with

the necessary depth to ensure that the meaningful voices of the respondents are not lost.

I plan to work with academic colleagues in the Environment and Sustainability Institute (University of Exeter, Penryn Campus) to digitally map the micro connections and interactions which are both products of and catalysts for the community cultural expression. This, I hope, will provide a tested way for individual communities to illustrate and reflect upon the impact which results from their endeavours and to provide them with quantitative measures of cultural impact which may appeal to decision makers, politicians and funders. Through the testing of the methodology through six case studies as part of the Cultural Destinations programme³⁰⁵ and the potential to roll out the methodology to different cultural networks across the region and beyond, it is hoped the approach will become familiar to both participants and their stakeholders. The use of appropriate software would potentially allow this study to find commonality with other case studies of community sustainability.

Another way to explore the creation of shared data sets would be through the development of a regular online publication or e-text book series through which different case studies are presented alongside theoretical constructs in order to move the literature from the typical *introduction* of the theory to a more consistent *application* of the theory. This is part of the rationale for the structure and content of this thesis which balances detailed documentation of case study and empirical results with substantial social and political theory critique within a Complexity framework – thus responding to the earlier limitations of Gilchrist's *The Well Connected Community* reviewed in Chapter 4. One of the major

³⁰⁵ <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-funding/funding-programmes/cultural-destinations/>

challenges which I have faced in connecting to relevant material are the terms of reference and how they are being applied to a wide range of different research contexts. This niche field of study requires effective tagging to ensure that search terms like “community”, “sustainability” and “Complexity” direct researchers to their “like-minded” colleagues. Building a community around key concepts like social self-organisation and feedback, for example, would enable researchers new to the field to enrich existing data and deepen analysis rather than beginning afresh.

I recognise that other Complexity colleagues in this field have attempted such endeavours. The Emerging Sustainability collaborative portal, developed through an Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) funded project³⁰⁶ provides such a forum for sharing and responding to research but has perhaps suffered a similar fate to the Look Group Ning with a lack of new content or new users slowing its effectiveness. My recommendation is not about attempting something new but calls for a renewal of the habit and having another push at creating shared content and linking to what has been published previously.

Section 2: The Research limitations

My review of the literature and indeed my own work presented here reveals a tendency to understand complex and adaptive processes as synonymous with positive normative processes. A complex adaptive system sometimes appears as a just, fair or moral system. Self-organisation is a process which underpins community sustainability by efficient use of the component parts and by constant interaction with the environment. It thus allows members to contribute

³⁰⁶ <http://emergingsustainability.org/>

in different ways to a continually evolving goal which is determined by the micro interactions between members creating emergent macro structures. The emergent structures in the Look Group network included security, a sense of belonging, mental health benefits and collective visual art knowledge which the members and partners all agreed were positive benefits for the participants and their wider communities. The dynamics which created these socially acceptable outcomes could, however, also create emergent structures with negative societal outcomes. This mirrors “the dark side of social capital” explored in Chapter 1. Complex models of positive social dynamics might be very similar to those of an organised crime network or administrative corruption. This is further evidence of Complexity’s precarious perch between naturalism and instrumentalism as explored in Chapter 2. This section is a plea to future researchers and participants using Complexity theory to recognise that normative assumptions about social acceptance will play a part in determining their assertions about the positive effects of the approach. Complexity will be a more powerful paradigm if it remains rigorous and not used for ideological driven political tit-for-tat in the ways which social capital approaches have appeared to.

Section 3: Recommendations to the research participants

A sustainable funding model for Look Groups?

It is my belief that the Look Groups should continue to co-adapt and co-evolve with Tate St Ives by keeping a strong association and friendship and as little formality as possible. The consultative model, which may develop through the current funding arrangement with the Heritage Lottery Fund, is a hopeful turn.

This should see the formation of new feedback loops which reduce the time lag in joining up activity by speeding up the iterations of cyclical behaviour. These relate to staff resource, the focus on Tate St Ives as the network hub where Look Group generated material can be displayed to and used by gallery visitors and the formation of new groups to reinvigorate the Cornwall-wide presence. Both Tate and the Look Groups need also be attuned to their different environments and try to look to anticipate change. For example, in the long term, if the economic and political climate continues to favour localism and bottom-up approaches to community sustainability over funding for large institutions, the network could respond by setting up a separately constituted body. This way, the network would be able to formalise some aspects of the groups that contribute to their sustainability *including* the relationship with Tate but have access to alternative streams of funding which could be used to finance venues and contract services from Tate or other galleries, museums and artist organisations. I recognise here that I am implying adding a new layer of complexity when I have earlier advocated an informal approach and see the danger in replacing one kind of formality with another. This is just an example of the type of awareness that a systems approach to considering their relationship might help to raise.

My second recommendation is that Tate and the Look Groups think together about how they could extend the principle of building groups around venues for mutual benefit as documented in Appendix 3. The Look Group members I met were community-minded, with excellent skills and knowledge of different layers of community and civil society in their locations. Paying for the use of a public venue through the use of skills like committee work, fundraising, volunteering or

networking (LETS model³⁰⁷) would give them an alternative to subscriptions and reinforce the weak connections so valuable for connecting to and adapting with different parts of the community.

Open up the virtual network

The Ning was a closed network which effectively died. The reasons for this appeared two-fold. The first was the building of the Ning on an unfamiliar platform. Most of the respondents were “not Facebook sort of people”³⁰⁸ but there were people within the groups who did use this service. Just one person connecting to the Ning could have facilitated communications with Tate and the rest of the network through their Facebook page and sharing updates at the face-to-face meetings. Instead, those users who did have the necessary knowledge and access to the internet were faced with another social media platform requiring log in, password and a new set of configurations for use. The second related reason was that since there was so little content being posted on the site, those who were persisting in using it were not seeing anything new or being asked to contribute so they stopped using it. There was no feedback and the online community dispersed. This is another example of locked-in behaviour which in this case stems from Tate’s public role dictating the prevention of copyrighted artistic works being shared over the internet. The network just needs a simple way to communicate informally and an open system (eg Facebook) would allow new members to “happen upon” the Look

³⁰⁷ Local Exchange Trading System – see Transitions Town movement

³⁰⁸ Look Group 3.

Group project who might not have found it through advertising or word-of-mouth thus increasing diversity in the membership. It is also a cost-effective means to build on the confidence that existing social media users within the groups have and reducing the need for specialist training or support.

Closing remarks

My final reflection relates to the viewpoints which appeared missing from the data: the connection between sustainability and the natural environment. During the Research and Networking Day I presented my perspectives on the sustainable community and its relationship with sustainable development using Scott Cato's nested model (see Chapter 1) and admitted my surprise that the groups' discussions about community sustainability during initial visits and negotiated feedback had not made a connection with the environment. The attendees' also appeared perplexed with this omission. Those that responded, reflected that the questions I had posed had perhaps conjured up ideas of social contexts and connections – the man-made environment – which appeared more relevant to the idea of a sustainable community.

There is a strong connection between the physical environment of Cornwall and the art produced in the region. The landscape has been fundamental to the formation of artistic and migratory communities which have in turn shaped Cornwall's economy and reliance on cultural tourism. From a sustainable development perspective, Cornwall's artistic heritage and contemporary creativity provides a rich platform from which to begin cycles of reflection and

action. The Look Groups, with their natural curiosity, ability to reflect and connectivity to both local place and community and wider national and international networks, have huge potential to explore and document this relationship with a view to achieving sustainable outcomes for community and environment.

My recommendations in Section 1 about modelling might assist here. Could the Look Groups and Tate model how their shared use of resources has contributed to the sustainability of their wider communities including the natural environment for example? The interdependence of different variables such as energy or resource use is problematic. What the groups might save in terms of car sharing to their meetings or through gaining wellbeing and enjoyment through less intensive forms of consumption compared to shopping or travel may be outweighed by their association with the carbon footprint Tate achieves through the staging of an exhibition of international art works and the climate control required to keep the works safe. The point is not to pinpoint causation but to facilitate reflection. The Complexity analysis suggests that through micro connections, macro behaviours may emerge through self organisation. This closing remark is thus an aspiration rather than a direction; that the connection between environmental sustainability and community sustainability is made more explicit through iterative reflection – made possible through the continued application of the four conditions which the Look Groups have valued and secured.

Appendix 1: The Project Context

Introduction

This research project is built around an in-depth, multi-layered case study of an informal learning initiative “The Look Group Network”. The case study aims to explore how government and communities interact and to highlight the conditions present in such partnerships which contribute to community sustainability. In this Appendix, I describe the project origins and history and a detailed description of the Look Group partners which maps their previous working relationship and their involvement in the design and delivery of the project.

The history of the project is important to this thesis, not only to provide a detailed context for the reader but also, as I outline in my review of the Complexity Literature (Chapter 2), because the history of a Complex Adaptive System influences its present and future behaviour. Throughout the writing of this thesis and in particular when conducting interviews and focus groups with participants I have been reminded of moments and events which I would not have immediately associated with this particular project but which on closer examination, and with the additional perspectives of other witnesses or colleagues, I have come to view as highly significant occurrences on which the direction of the Look Group activity appeared to depend. As a member of the project development team at Tate St Ives and one of the co-authors of the funding bid which launched the Look Group Network, I wish to account for my own role in the history of the project and how this knowledge and experience may have influenced my approach to the research. From a systems and complexity perspective this is about counting myself as part of the system and

recognising the impact that my research activities might have an impact on parts and the whole of the system.

The report is divided into three main sections. I begin by exploring Cornwall as a specific context to the project and providing an overview to a number of context related themes which surface later in the empirical data. These include regional geography, institutions, culture and cultural heritage, migration patterns and political identity. The second section provides an overview of the project case study, a description of the project partners and the national adult informal learning strategy which directed the project. This section charts, in particular, a long and productive but constantly evolving and challenging relationship between Tate St Ives and Cornwall Council. The final section summarises the main phases of activity of the project from the initial proposal development and project creation through to current activity. The aim of this section is to define the boundaries of the project and different levels of partner engagement as well as providing a project chronology.

Section 1: The Cornwall Context

My assumptions at the beginning of the research project were that the Look Group case study would provide insight into communities as a general phenomenon. If there was to be any geographic limitation to the lens which informal learning provided as a means to examine sustainable community dynamics and processes, I believed the UK to be a relevant sphere for comparative analysis and the projection of recommendations. This perhaps reveals my assumption that central government had a definite role in designing

and governing this field of public concern and more specifically in the project itself – an assumption influenced by the involvement of Tate as a national non-departmental government body and other national funders like BIS and NIACE. A case study approach demands a process of defining what the subject is a case of. I had been also been reluctant to specifically refer to the case study as a case of something in Cornwall – or a Cornish case. My limited knowledge and understanding of the discipline of Cornish Studies had given me the impression that what constitutes “Cornishness” was really a debate for the Cornish themselves. Taking part would require the kind of knowledge and back history acquired through a lifetime of *experience* not a few years study and was thus, as an outsider, beyond my grasp. My own experiences as an incomer to the region had included the occasional negative comment about how I wasn’t really “local” because I had not been born in Cornwall which chimed with descriptions of prejudice towards minority migrant groups and debates about the British identity. On one occasion my colleagues and I at Tate St Ives received an anonymous e mail with a film mock-up of the gallery being fire bombed – an incident which though isolated was nevertheless investigated by Devon and Cornwall Police Intelligence Unit (Special Branch) as a terrorism threat with nationalist suspects. Alongside this, my familiarity with the work of regional development agencies, public funding bodies and private sector investors had left the impression that Cornwall needed greater evidence of how it fitted the mould rather than how it broke it. The Convergence programme, through which this research is funded, was aligned with the Lisbon Treaty which called for outward-facing, forward-looking economic development³⁰⁹. An exploration of the Cornish identity seemed in opposition to this aspiration.

³⁰⁹ Convergence Programme for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly Operational Programme 2007-

The review of the literature on communities which is reported in Chapter 1 challenged my naiveté that community could be generalised or, as Jean-Luc Nancy postulated, “pre-supposed”³¹⁰. The research participants agreed and were keen to express the wide variety of different elements which make up a community illustrating these features with examples from their own lived experience in Cornwall. They also changed my perspective on the significance of Cornwall’s context to the research. Rather than present an array of statistics which position Cornwall in relation to other counties or regions in the UK (though some examples are provided) my reflections on the Cornwall context thus introduce some of the inter-related and interdependent themes which arose from the interviews and focus groups highlighting in particular those aspects of life in Cornwall which, if not in isolation then in combination, contribute to a unique context and environment for the research to be taking place in.

*The motto of the Duchy is “One and All”, and it may be interpreted in this way, that the visitor who opens his eyes to the wooded loveliness of the Fowey valley and closes them to the deserted broken-down chimneys of old tin-mines and the mountainous white pyramids of china clay refuse that litter the hill-sides, has no chance whatever of getting to know the real Cornwall.*³¹¹

The above quote from Mais’s *The Cornish Riviera*, written in the first half of the twentieth century, retains much relevance today. Written as a guide for visitors, the work reveals a region of contrasting landscapes with the author urging his readers to look beyond the aesthetics of the symbols and artefacts of Cornwall’s rich industrial history to search out the authentic place and presumably people.

13 p15

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/315870/Cornwall_Isles_of_Scilly_Convergence_Operational_Programme_2007-14.pdf

last accessed 13/08/14

³¹⁰ Nancy, J-L. (1991) p xxxix

³¹¹ Mais S.P.B. (1934) quoted in Goodman, (2009) p 35

Cornwall remains a region which welcomes and depends upon large numbers of visitors to support its post-industrial economy. The china clay refuse and broken down chimneys may have been softened by years of weathering and re-packaged as visitor attractions by organisations such as the Eden Project and the Cornish Mining World Heritage Sites but the growth of Cornwall as a cosmopolitan, high-end destination built around attractive coastal towns and villages, leaves great swathes of the region untouched by tourism for the very reason that they are *too* authentically Cornish. Poverty and peripherality continue to be distinctive features of life for communities in Cornwall but are not part of the tourist experience which is increasingly targeting “high-earning, high-spending visitors seeking authenticity, quality and learning opportunities”³¹². There is also a strong association between tourism and migration with evidence (Burley (2007); Shaw and Williams (1987) and Elzey (1998)) suggesting the lifestyle options showcased to visitors as part of the tourist offer – access to outstanding landscapes, slower pace of life, sense of community – drive migration to the region for both retirees and the economically active. I write as one such migrant who moved to Cornwall to take advantage of outdoor, sporting and social activities I had experienced as a visitor and my personal and professional networks – much like the Look Groups - are full of other people who are living in Cornwall for the same reasons.

The second point of interest in the extract from Mais is the use of the term “Duchy”. Organisations and communities in Cornwall including the Destination Management Organisation ‘Visit Cornwall’ and local radio stations continue to refer to the region’s history as a territory of the Duke of Cornwall. This is partly to appease Cornish nationalists who use the word “county” as a shorthand term

³¹² The South West Historic Environment Forum (2013)

for the local authority, formerly Cornwall County Council³¹³. Additionally nationalists point to the fact that Cornwall was never legally incorporated into England via an Act of Union as part of the region's unique heritage³¹⁴. The use of the term Duchy is not emblematic of a pro-Royalist identity – many Cornish Constitutionalists would like to see a major overhaul of the structures and investments of the Duchy of Cornwall which owns 2% of Cornwall and the freehold of much of the Isles of Scilly³¹⁵. Rather it is a means to assert a distinctive political and cultural identity; other overt examples of which include the use of the Cornish language on road signs, the flying of the St Piran's flag and the marking of ancient feast days with traditional words, music, dance, costume and other customs. The flurry of interest and excitement which accompanied the announcement in April 2014 that the UK government would recognise the Cornish people as a minority nationality³¹⁶ presented an opportunity for a range of quite disparate and often quarrelling groups to try to push forward a more united cultural and political public profile for Cornwall. The pattern of fragmentation of activists drawn to different institutions such as the Stannary movement, the Cornish branch of the Celtic League, Mebyon Kernow³¹⁷ and the Cornish Nationalist party³¹⁸ has created tensions around the representation of Cornish identity and culture. Past disputes over the forms of spelling used to represent Kernewek Kemmyn (Common Cornish) and long-running and sometimes racially imbued debates over what it means to describe oneself as Cornish may now be eclipsed by such joyful celebrations such as

³¹³ Willett, J. (2014) online source

³¹⁴ Multiple web sources including http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornish_nationalism and the Local Government Commission 1995 p5 quoted in Payton 1996:296.

³¹⁵ "Cornish peer calls for Duchy of Cornwall overhaul" BBC News website <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cornwall-22012547> last accessed 01/07/14

³¹⁶ under the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities

³¹⁷ The Party for Cornwall – see www.mebyonkernow.org

³¹⁸ Payton, P. (1996) pp 291-2

“Speak Cornish Week”. Organised by MAGA, the Cornish Language Partnership, July 2014 saw Facebook and Twitter flooded with 10 second films of the general public speaking Cornish³¹⁹.

The reality is, however, that the Cornish identity is more complex, nuanced and location specific and this was expressed by the research participants many of whom were recent migrants. The unwritten rules of community behaviour are bound up with notions of belonging, pride and a rootedness to place which are specific to small groups within each community. As the population of Cornwall has grown due to inward migration, the community identity has become elusive and the participants described, from both the perspective of insider and outsider, how difficult it was to communicate or adopt the informal set of rules or customs. Difference and diversity in identity and cultural norms within a relatively small population has been intensified in some parts of the region by geography. The dispersed nature of the rural population, the weak regional transport infrastructure and rising cost of owning and fuelling a car³²⁰ were reported by the respondents as possible reasons that communities retain or renew these distinct identities and local “rules” for community engagement as the economic situation forces families and individuals to focus their activity more locally.

Cornwall’s economic under-performance was a major preoccupation for the organisations I was working with prior to commencing this research project. Cornwall Council and the South West Regional Development Agency had very clearly defined and specific objectives to increase employment, regional gross value added (GVA) levels and skills in the region in line with the European

³¹⁹ <http://www.learncornishnow.com/speak-cornish-week.html>

³²⁰ Cornwall Council (2011) p16

Union funding programmes (Objective One and Convergence) which Cornwall qualified for through its weak economic status and at times this narrowed their view of the value of the cultural activity I was engaged in. Some respondents also reported these feelings of culture being marginalised and under-valued by more pressing economic concerns like the creation of jobs whilst others felt that regional government agencies had the balance right in focussing on jobs and housing.

According to recent statistics Cornwall's economy is worth £7.5 billion³²¹. It is described by Cornwall Council as "small but growing" in a document which acknowledges the regional economy is the second weakest in the UK according to a 2011 'league table'³²². The high proportion of self employed residents and the reliance on seasonal employment relating to farming and tourism are highlighted as challenges to Cornwall's recovery from the global recession. Tourism is further highlighted as a threat to Cornwall's communities through its links to increasing house prices through the second/holiday homes market. And yet the tourism industry is central to Cornwall Council's plans for economic recovery. The Economic and Culture strategy describes tourism as a "bedrock" sector along with agriculture, support for which are "essential elements" for delivering growth, productivity and resilience³²³. A new focus is in creating improved communication and collaboration between the tourism sector and the cultural sector with a view to "generat(ing) increased levels of business"³²⁴ this furthering Willett's argument that Cornwall's regional distinctiveness and thus global competitiveness is founded on this indivisible relationship between

³²¹ Office for National Statistics (2012)

³²² Cornwall Council (2013) *Cornwall's Economy at a glance*
<https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/3624042/Cornwalls-economy-at-a-glance.pdf>

³²³ Cornwall Council (2013) p 12

³²⁴ Ibid

Cornwall's cultural heritage and its economy³²⁵. The strategy also emphasises Cornwall's strong "sense of community" and "outstanding natural environment"³²⁶ as critical conditions for quality of life and sets out a focus on increased community and social engagement³²⁷ to underpin cultural and heritage activity as part of economic growth.

The themes of isolation and economic fragility came together strongly in the aftermath of the multi-million pound damage to Cornwall's infrastructure in the 2014 winter storms. Not only were individual communities evacuated or cut off from one another by fallen trees or flooding, but the rail line connecting Devon and Cornwall to the rest of the UK was destroyed leaving the region with no mainline rail connection. Cornwall Council were forced to appeal to central government for additional funds for repairs which included Penzance's art deco lido, the Jubilee Pool, in order to keep Cornwall's economy viable. These events also present the opportunity to briefly revisit the theme of Cornish identity. Whilst the local media called on users of social media to use the hashtag #openforbusiness to help spread the message out that storm damage was not going to affect economic activity³²⁸, the Cornish comedian, Kernow King highlighted an alternative perspective. Writing in the national online press, he quoted tweets³²⁹ which celebrated the fact that Cornwall was cut off from England and tried to explain their sentiments:

³²⁵ Willett, J (2014)

³²⁶ Cornwall Council (2013) p7

³²⁷ Ibid p 13

³²⁸ <http://www.cornishguardian.co.uk/Cornwall-8220-open-business-8221-storms/story-20592379-detail/story.html>

³²⁹ Posts on the social media, micro-blogging platform Twitter

*Our history, our language, our culture, our sports, our people ... we're Cornish before we're anything else. Without that rail link, we may well be cut off, but because communities pull together for each other, we're even more Cornish now.*³³⁰

I use this quote and references to the 2014 storms to conclude this section as they neatly summarise the tensions expressed in the data collected through this project and my own experiences of living in Cornwall. There is a sense of wanting to be isolated and enjoying the distinctiveness of culture, people and landscape which results from being on very edge of the land. At the same time, however, remoteness brings challenges which need the support of government - transport, economic development, employment were some examples given by participants. But with government intervention comes renewed tension, resistance and attempts to move away from this influence and assert independence, community and distinctiveness.

Section 2: The Look Group Network Case Study

Overview

The Look Group Network is a series of interconnected groups of adult learners who meet in venues across Cornwall to talk and learn together about visual art. The Network was established in 2009 by Tate St Ives, a modern and contemporary art gallery, in partnership with Cornwall Council, the local authority. The initial project funding was provided by a grant from the Learning Transformation Fund which invested in informal learning programmes. Informal

³³⁰ “Proper job! It's England that's cut off from Cornwall, not the other way round” The Guardian website

Thursday 6th February 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/06/england-cut-off-from-cornwall>

learning is here defined as non-vocational activities which are undertaken for enjoyment rather than to gain qualifications.

The aspiration for the project was to provide visual art learning opportunities for communities across Cornwall which could take place outside of the gallery but be related to and ultimately feed into the adult programme within the Tate St Ives building. Tate St Ives motivations for establishing the Look Group Network were thus broadly to reach new audiences and experiment with new ways of supporting adult informal learning. Working with Cornwall Council to deliver the project was in part due to the stipulation in the Learning Transformation Fund that projects demonstrate evidence of partnership building and Cornwall Council's interest in seeing their investment in Tate St Ives bring benefits to residents across the county. With a sixteen year history of working together, as landlord (Cornwall Council) and tenant (Tate St Ives) and a more recent partnership initiative to drive forward Tate's ambitions for site expansion, the two organisations had a track record of collaboration and an understanding of areas of mutual interest which fed into this project.

The following sections will describe the remit, organisation history, strategic priorities and project aspirations of the project partners: Tate St Ives and Cornwall Council.

Project Partners

Tate and Tate St Ives

As a member of staff, I was able to observe Tate from two different perspectives. From its headquarters in Westminster, Tate provides the overarching structure, vision and values of the organisation and manages relationships with central government and other key national partners. Tate St Ives, where I was working, presents exhibitions, displays and activities for a regional audience in the South West and has working relationships with a number of partners in Cornwall and the wider region. In terms of securing external funding, which was the main remit of my role, the different Tate sites and centralised programmes such as research and the care and development of the Tate Collection were often in direct competition with one another in an increasingly sparse funding environment. I feel it worth continuing this distinction in the description which follows as it may help to account for the different relationships within the system and also to introduce some of the views of Tate from the research participants which (to paraphrase) range from faceless monolith to friendly facilitator.

Tate

Tate describes itself as a “family of four art galleries housing the UK's collection of British art from 1500 and of international modern art”³³¹. In addition to the physical gallery spaces, the Tate website provides online access to the 66,000+ works in the Tate collection and a range of interactive programmes which can be used in conjunction with a visit to a Tate gallery or promote enjoyment and understanding of the Collection in their own right.

³³¹ Source Tate website www.tate.org.uk

The beginnings of Tate can be traced to Sir Henry Tate's donation of sixty works of art to the National Gallery in 1889. The gift came with strings – the National Gallery were required to provide a room or rooms to house the works within three years of accepting the gift and to name the displays: the Tate Collection. After initially declining the gift on the grounds that an extension could not be afforded, the National Gallery and Parliament were forced to recognise a growing public groundswell, led by artists and *The Times* newspaper in favour of a new institution dedicated to British art³³². The search for an appropriate home for the Tate Collection led to the building of the Millbank Gallery which is now Tate Britain. It is appropriate to mention these beginnings as they continue to shape Tate's identity as a public organisation in the 21st century. Beyond the continued use of Sir Henry's surname and publicising his generosity in appealing to potential donors, the Tate bequest could be seen to have set a culture of openly allowing and encouraging external influence. One more recent example is the controversial UBS sponsorship partnership in which works from the investment bank's collection of modern and contemporary art were displayed at Tate Modern. Critics felt it was inappropriate for a publicly funded organisation to be giving such exposure to these works which would then appreciate in value before being sold for profit. Of greater relevance to this account is the partnership between Cornwall County Council and Tate which resulted in the establishment of Tate St Ives which will be explored in the second part of this section.

Tate is a non-departmental government body (NDGB) and receives around 40% of its funding as Grant-in-Aid direct from the Department for Culture, Media and

³³² Spalding, S. (1998) p 13

Sport (DCMS). The sponsoring department delegate key responsibilities to Tate but the organisation remains administratively independent. The terms of this relationship are laid out in three year renewable funding agreements with DCMS. In the funding agreement in place at the time the Look Group project was developed and initially operating (2009 -2012) Tate were asked to report against two areas “that are of greatest priority to Ministers”. These were the diversity of audience, staff and Board of Governors and initiatives to promote sustainability and tackle climate change. NDGB’s or para government organisations (PGO) are a common feature of modern democracies. Hood describes three modes of emergence for PGO’s – top down, bottom up and sideways creations. Top down PGO’s like Tate are important to governments for managing “areas that involve delicate and inevitably controversial issues of public taste, acceptability, ‘balance’ rather than bias in selection” allowing the administration to keep at arm’s-length and “out of frontline responsibility for such decisions.”³³³. In many ways Tate is a good example of a top down PGO. Public taste in art is notoriously mainstream and slow to respond to movements, media and ideas that may be considered quite passé by artistic communities. Tate not only has the specialist knowledge, expertise and networks required to organise and judge such a contest but is ready and willing to deal with the critical fallout in ways which the government could and would never do.

But Tate is not just an arbiter of artistic taste devolved from government to protect Ministerial reputations. The organisation has bold ambitions of its own which reflect the aspirations of its staff, stakeholders and audiences. This vision for Tate has evolved over the life of the organisation and has also responded to the physical and socio-political environments in which it operates.

³³³ Hood, C. (1991) p 171

Tate has numerous channels for individuals and organisations to take part in the life of the organisation beyond just stepping through the door of a gallery or visiting the Tate website. Like most publicly funded cultural organisations in the UK, Tate has invested in Audience Development initiatives to try to diversify and grow its existing audiences. Arts Council England – the arts development agency for England and a regular funder of Tate’s exhibition and learning programmes - define audience development as “activity which is undertaken specifically to meet the needs of existing and potential audiences and to help arts organisations to develop ongoing relationships with audiences. It can include aspects of marketing, commissioning, programming, education, customer care and distribution.”³³⁴ Tate’s cross-site Audience Development strategy is led by Tate Learning and a commitment to work with local communities as an audience has strongly emerged over the last five years.

“Working as part of its local communities is a central part of Tate’s work”³³⁵

The aspirations for Tate to work in a way which might appear to some (including some of the research participants) to go beyond the traditional gallery role of art curator or conservator are shown to be a complex overlapping of internal and external influences. Funders like DCMS and Arts Council demand the achievement of certain objectives ranging from increasing engagement with under-represented groups in society to contributing to the green Government agenda. These objectives are a means of justifying public investment in the arts amongst sectors of society and government who view galleries as elite or

³³⁴ Source Arts Council England website www.artscouncilengland.org.uk

³³⁵ Trustees of the Tate Gallery Annual Report 2010/11 p 46

as being of lesser importance than other concerns in a time of austerity. They also reflect the values of politicians and advisers who believe in the transformative power of the arts. Tate staff accept these directives in order to achieve their individual or collective ambitions for art exhibitions and/or because they genuinely believe in art as an instrument of social change. This complexity of internal and external influence is further intensified by the permeability of the boundaries between the different organisations. Many senior posts within DCMS and Arts Council are filled with former Tate employees and vice-versa resulting in a cyclical re-invention of shared public facing aspirations.

Tate St Ives

Tate St Ives (TSI) is a modern and contemporary gallery and art museum located in the town of St Ives in the far west of Cornwall. It presents three exhibition seasons across the year showing “the best in international modern and contemporary art” and a complementary learning and events programme. Hailed as a beacon of economic regeneration for Cornwall and an inspiration to other local authorities considering cultural projects, TSI receives in excess of 200,000 visits³³⁶ per year bringing £12 million into the Cornish economy³³⁷. It employs 53 full time equivalent posts across curatorial, learning, administrative, communications, visitor services, retail, catering and building operations functions. The learning and visitor services teams are supported by 40 volunteers and the gallery has recently offered internship posts in the curatorial team to new graduates.

³³⁶ Source Tate St Ives. Actual figure 204, 594 (2012/13)

³³⁷ Source Tate: <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/tate-st-ives-phase-two>

The team of gallery education specialists are at the frontline in terms of delivering the public engagement agenda which Tate and its external funders are advocating. Staff work alongside artists and volunteers to deliver a multi-faceted programme of activities ranging from the provision of simple worksheets and crayons for families through to a membership scheme for schools which provides training, materials and online resources to help teachers plan and optimise their class visit to the gallery. Since the inception of the Look Group project, the team have also been responsible for supporting an increased programme of off-site learning and public engagement activity. The following section will argue that Tate St Ives' aspiration to work with its local communities was rooted in a temporally more distant and geographically more local history than the centralised notion of community engagement emphasised by Tate and its funding stakeholders.

Tate St Ives and the Community: a brief history

Tate St Ives opened in 1993. It followed an eight year campaign by Cornwall County Council and local people to establish a gallery to celebrate the legacy of the St Ives Modernist artist colony and to promote year round tourism³³⁸. Tate were not formally invited to become part of the gallery management until relatively late in the day. Whilst it was hoped that Tate would loan paintings and sculptures from the Tate Collection, at the time that the campaign took shape, Tate was struggling to find sufficient funds for the building of its first out-of-London gallery, Tate Liverpool. Tate, however, already a presence in St Ives having taken over the running of the Barbara Hepworth Museum in 1983 and with a commitment to lend works and the Director and senior staff regularly

³³⁸ Axten, J. (1995)

visiting the town, Tate assumed an advisory capacity which grew into greater involvement such as the selection of the development site and appointment of architects. Only after the £2 million development costs had been raised from public and private sources in 1990 did the Director put forward a proposal to the Trustees for Tate to lease the gallery from Cornwall:

*In this way, Cornwall County Council would remain responsible for the fabric and maintenance of the building, but the Tate could assume responsibility for staff, and the education and exhibition programme, and would have greater control over the use of the Tate's St Ives collection.*³³⁹

The gallery was developed on the site of a disused gasworks overlooking Porthmeor Beach and the seascapes which had inspired generations of artists to make their work in St Ives. The building was designed for 70,000 visitors per year but all expectations were far surpassed with Tate St Ives welcoming 120,000 visitors in its first year. Before the economic downturn, the gallery was regularly topping 240,000 visitors. The wear and tear to the building and the cramped accommodation for both visitors and staff were deemed problematic and in 2003, with the announcement of the Objective One funding programme for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, discussions began between Cornwall County Council and Tate to explore options for expansion onto the Barnoon car park to the rear of the Gallery. The public announcement of this controversial site in 2005 was a critical point in the relationship between Tate and the community in St Ives. The potential loss of around seventy car parking spaces in a town where traffic congestion and shortage of parking spaces are a major issue sparked a "Stop the Tate" campaign led by a highly organised and articulate group who targeted local and national media, potential funders including the Heritage Lottery Fund and collected thousands of signatures on a

³³⁹ Spalding, F. (1998) p 265

petition³⁴⁰. Tate and Cornwall Council were forced to put their plans on hold until a less incendiary expansion solution could be found. In 2011 the development of the adjacent sheltered housing scheme opened up a space below the car park which was purchased by Cornwall Council as part of their contribution to the project after St Ives Town Council gave their positive approval to the new project. Following a renewed community consultation and the securing of necessary public funding, work began on the first phase of building in January 2014. The extension will be completed and opened to the public in 2016.³⁴¹

The history presented here shows Tate St Ives being created and growing through the interactions of distinct and shared community and local authority agendas. The gallery's public engagement activity is thus driven not only by strategies developed by the relationships between Tate and its main funding bodies but by a set of similarly interdependent and overlapping groups in Cornwall who uphold the authority of Tate and Tate St Ives on matters focused on the conservation and preservation of art but who seek to influence and direct the gallery's operations in Cornwall.

My account now turns to the document relevant aspects of Cornwall Council's history which contributed to the Look Group project partnership.

Cornwall Council

Cornwall Council is the unitary authority with responsibility for the 3563 km² area and the half a million population of peninsular Cornwall and the Isles of

³⁴⁰ These are my own memories of events.

³⁴¹ <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/tate-st-ives-phase-two/project-background-and-delivery>

Scilly³⁴². The Council was created on 1st April 2009 by merging the six district councils of North Cornwall, Restormel, Kerrier, Carrick, Caradon and Penwith with Cornwall County Council. This followed the publication of “Strong and Prosperous Communities”(DCLG 2006), the Local Government White Paper which invited councils in two tier areas to submit proposals to re-organise into a unitary authority, and a successful bid by Cornwall County Council to the Department for Local Government and Communities which was approved by the government in July 2007. One of the arguments put forward in favour of a unitary authority was that Cornwall would be able to speak with one united voice and assert the region’s political and cultural identity in the face of future external influences from its neighbours in the South West or from Westminster³⁴³.

The background to the unitary Cornwall Council is of importance to this study for a number of reasons. The process of re-organising six district councils into one local authority was not simple and created delays to the usual policy and decision making processes which Tate St Ives, as a regular working partner, was used to dealing with. Between 1st April 2009 and the election of councillors in June 2009, the council entered a purdah in which no major decisions could be made. Following the election, in which the Liberal Democrats lost their overall control and a coalition between Conservative and Independent Councillors was formed, there then followed a period of appointing new staff, re-structuring departments and agreeing new objectives. It was during this chaotic period that colleagues and I at Tate St Ives were attempting to form relationships with new councillors and council officials and trying to persuade them to support and engage with the Look Group proposal.

³⁴² Source: Cornwall Council website www.cornwall.gov.uk

³⁴³ Sandford, M. (2002) p 49-50

One of the challenges that the unitary bid recognised and pledged to address was the uneven pattern of investment and commitment to the Arts across the six district councils. In Penwith, the most westerly of the districts, are three of the top cultural visitor attractions: Tate St Ives, Newlyn Art Gallery and the Minack Theatre whilst North Cornwall was considered by Council officials to be something of a cultural wasteland, with little or no provision for either residents or visitors to engage with the arts within the district. Prior to the unitary bid approval Cornwall County Council had initiated two projects which sought to address the patchy cultural provision across the region: the establishment of the Cornwall Council Creative Unit and the European Regional of Culture project. The Creative Unit was set up in partnership with and with direct financial support from Arts Council South West and aimed to take a more strategic, Cornwall-wide approach to business planning for culture and the creative industries. The European Region of Culture project was championed by the Creative Unit and was an attempt to lobby Europe to create a new designation for regions of culture recognising that the European City of Culture competition would not work for a rural region like Cornwall without any major urban centre on which to centre either activity or investment.

In 2009, the new Communities Directorate, which now directed the activities of the Creative Unit, found common ground with Tate St Ives in developing the Look Group proposal through the idea of creating a dispersed cultural learning offer across Cornwall to try to ensure that the benefits of a national arts institution like Tate could be felt by communities outside of West Cornwall. This devolution of public goods to the corners of Cornwall was also very much

aligned with Cornwall Council's localism agenda. In advance of the unitary council mergers, Cornwall County Council had begun consultation to establish Community Network Areas which would bring together town councils to manage some devolved responsibilities and resources.

Despite Cornwall Council's track record for delivering ground-breaking projects and the apparent appetite for innovation through partnership with external bodies including central government, (see Appendix 2) the organisation's reputation at a local level over the last five years has been dominated by the "horrifying"³⁴⁴ cuts to public services which the Council has been making in response a reduction to its budget from central government. Since 2010 the Council has been required to make savings of £170m and will be looking for additional savings of up to £195m over the next five years.³⁴⁵ Every area of Council activity has seen a reduction in spending – a strategy which though perhaps aimed at parity and fairness, ignores the interconnectedness of different areas of community life. The anxiety expressed by the research respondents over the impact of cuts to services such as libraries and public venues has been proven justified with a reduction in staffing forcing libraries into part-time opening hours. In my community, the reduced library service in St Just has been justified by the Council Cabinet Member for Shared Services and the councillor for the constituency as being a necessary evil to ensure the growing need for adult social care can be met. This argument sadly overlooks the role which libraries play in offering a hub for connecting older and vulnerable

³⁴⁴ <http://www.westbriton.co.uk/Horrifying-cuts-proposed-draft-Cornwall-Council/story-19915965-detail/story.html>

³⁴⁵ <http://www.cornwall.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/council-news-room/media-releases/news-from-2014/news-from-february-2014/cornwall-council-formally-approves-budget-for-2014-2015/>

adults to essential information and training and offering companionship – themes of which surfaced in the discussions with the Look Group participants and reported in Chapter 5.

The Learning Revolution

Next under consideration is the Learning Revolution, the Government White paper on adult informal learning on whose principles the Look Group project was modelled. The Look Group Network came into being through the development of a competitive funding bid to the Learning Revolution Fund - a £20m pot of money designated by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) for informal learning which accompanied the 2009 Government White Paper on Adult Informal Learning.

The Learning Revolution Fund was managed by the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)³⁴⁶. The White Paper reveals that DIUS wanted to respond to the nation's great "passion" for learning – evidenced by the popularity of, for example, book groups, museums and public lectures. Throughout the document, the authors were at great pains to distinguish informal learning from vocational education or skills training. It is clear the intended outcomes are for the benefit of society rather than specifically the economy:

Although informal learning can be a good way of developing work-related skills, this movement is made up of a kaleidoscope of part-time, non-

³⁴⁶ NIACE describe themselves as "the national voice for lifelong learning in England and Wales", Their campaigns aim to address inequalities in the accessibility of lifelong learning by bringing opportunities to under-represented groups allowing all adults to benefit from the "personal, social and economic benefits from lifelong learning" Source NIACE website <http://www.niace.org.uk/our-work>

vocational learning where the primary purpose isn't to gain a qualification. People participate for enjoyment and are driven by their desire for personal fulfilment or intellectual, creative and physical stimulation.

Such activity also contributes to the health and well-being of communities by building the confidence and resilience of the individuals involved. The social relationships that develop as a result of this informal learning can provide networks of support and solidarity. For the low-skilled and under-confident, informal learning can be an important stepping stone to further learning and a more skilled future.³⁴⁷

Alluding throughout to the role of informal learning in social sustainability as illustrated in the above extract, and to more general conceptualisations of sustainability – sustainable approaches to volunteering and online learning - The Learning Revolution also made an explicit reference to community sustainability. This almost casual reference, read at a time when I was continually mentally re-assessing Tate's contribution to and responsibility towards its local communities in order to populate different funding bids became part of the inspiration for the research project.

Informal learning can make a strong contribution to delivering Sustainable Community Strategies and Local Area Agreements, but currently its role is not always recognised.³⁴⁸

The Learning Revolution led by DIUS (later the Department for Business and Innovation Skills) was an ambitious strategic programme which sought to embed informal learning within the policy making and resource use of four other government departments: Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCFS), Department of Health (DH), Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and DCMS. Alongside these heavy-weights, a host of

³⁴⁷ Extract from the Learning Revolution's working definition of informal adult learning (DIUS 2009: 17)

³⁴⁸ DIUS 2009:43

major corporations, local authorities, unions, national para-governmental organisations and charities with an interest in informal learning were invited to make “The Learning Pledge” to show their commitment to building an informal learning culture. In addition to the £20m Learning Revolution Fund already mentioned, DIUS committed to support a campaign to publicise a nationwide Festival of Learning. This investment of public and private sector resources was being made in the knowledge that parts of the programme of events led by DIUS and all of the projects funded by Learning Revolution Fund grants might take place under a new government. There was therefore no guarantee of further funding or strategic direction by the lead department to support all the projects that had been funded, nor any formal commitment for the government departments to work together as outlined in the paper, in the long-term. With this in mind, a re-examination of the White Paper revealed the following evidence of intentional actions to support the extended life of the policy:

- The Learning Pledge
- Emphasis on partnership particularly with local authorities
- Advice and guidance for self organising groups
- The Learning Revolution Web portal – for individual, self-directed learning and signposting
- Selection of NIACE as managers of the Learning Transformation Fund
- Advocating a role for Learning Champions

This commitment to sustainability is relevant to this study because of its situation within a public management context. The Tate and Cornwall Council interviews, reported in Appendices 2 and 3 respectively, also document this public sector view of the term “sustainable” as being about maintaining a

service. This perspective has strong economic foundations – aspiring to deliver a programme of activity that is affordable and delivers a return on investment. It also has social implications with public managers wanting a service which engages with the target group and can continue to deliver benefits to those communities in the face of a continually evolving political environment. From a central government department to local authority and NDGB, all are only guaranteed a short window of opportunity in which to try to effect change before an election, re-structure or re-think in policy comes along. Most of the attempts outlined above to maintain the aims of the Learning Revolution were short-lived. No trace of the Learning Pledge or the Learning Revolution web portal remain and whilst NIACE continue to support and influence the policy sphere of informal learning they are at the behest of a new set of government policies and funding programmes (see Chapter 3). An assessment of the effectiveness of local authority partnership as a tool for embedding sustainability would demand an extensive survey of Learning Transformation funded projects and the programme evaluation does not quantify the impact of partnership working. The qualitative evaluation data gives rather a mixed picture with some partnerships described as being “*crucial in helping projects meet their Transformation Fund aims*”³⁴⁹. In contrast, the evaluation concludes that “*some partnerships did not run smoothly and sometimes inhibited achievement of the learning aims, for example by not sharing responsibility equally*”³⁵⁰ and this view chimes closely with the experiences of the Look Group partners. Promoting self-organisation is cited as an area of greater success with the NIACE document claiming that “autonomy and ownership through self-organisation encouraged

³⁴⁹ NIACE (2010) p 5

³⁵⁰ Ibid

sustainability”³⁵¹ across a range of projects where “self-organisation” was interpreted through both formal or informal learning methods. This, as the results chapters will attest, closely represents the experiences of the Look Group members.

My overall impression of the Learning Revolution as a policy has been positive. I welcomed the emphasis on learning for its own sake and the recognition that supporting self-organised community learning around passions and interests rather than skills and employability could bring significant benefits to individuals and communities’ health and wellbeing. The programme funded 314 local initiatives from public, private and voluntary sector organisations and partnerships across England and Wales and enabled 1,119,289 adults to experience at least one informal learning session in their community³⁵². The policy and accompanying funding programme were not without contradictions and challenges, however. The development by Ofsted of a new pilot approach to inspecting informal learning settings appeared to miss the point about the nature of informal learning and introduce a greater level of formality and restrictions³⁵³. So too did the evaluation of the programme which focussed on measuring progression from funded projects into other forms of adult learning - particularly those through which the learner could access skills for employment (eg Skills for Life) – or directly into employment. The social impact highlighted in the White Paper including connecting communities, improving communication, raising self-esteem did not seem to have been measured. One significant influence on the processes which shaped the Look Group project, that was also reflected in the official evaluation were the tight time-scales for

³⁵¹ Ibid p 10

³⁵² Ibid p 2

³⁵³ DIUS (2009) p 46

delivering the projects. The NIACE document presents this challenge in a positive light:

With a one-off injection of £20 million and less than nine months to prove its worth, the Fund reached more than one million people and showed how innovative and creative project activity can have an immediate catalytic effect on reframing the learning landscape.

The Look Group project partners reported a less than positive experience of working within these time constrained conditions. The following and final section in this chapter outlines the main project phases to shed light on this intense period of activity.

Section 3: Main phases of project development

Having introduced the Cornwall context, the main project partners and the specific government strategy which shaped the project, I now describe the main phases of the project from the funding proposal development in 2009 through to the most recent Look Group activity in 2014. To assist the reader, Figure 1 provides a chronology which combines the main dates of activity for both the Learning Revolution and Learning Transformation fund alongside the Look Group Project development.

Figure 8: Learning Revolution and Look Group Project Chronology

Date	Event/Activity
March 2009	Publication of <i>The Learning Revolution</i> Government White Paper on adult informal learning and announcement of Learning Transformation Fund to support policy outcomes
1 st April 2009	Cornwall Council unitary authority created through merger of six district councils
April – June 2009	8 week pre-election “purdah”
4 th June 2009	Cornwall Council elections held

12 th July 2009	Submission deadline for Learning Transformation Fund
August 2009	Announcement of funding for Look Group project
September – December 2009	Cross-Cornwall advertising campaign Sourcing of venues 22 groups established and meeting Welcome event held at Tate St Ives
December 2009	Final reporting for Learning Transformation Fund grant
2010 – 2013	Groups running with minimal support from Tate St Ives. 11 groups still operational in 2013.
2013	Announcement of Heritage Lottery Fund grant for Look Group Project and appointment of Assistant Learning Curator to support new phase of activity.

Funding Proposal Development and submission

Before even submitting the bid, Tate St Ives had to negotiate with other Tate sites and departments who had similar adult informal learning projects requiring funding. The decision lay with the Director of Tate National and the Head of Public Funding who had both been involved in early discussions about the Look Group proposal and agreed that the Tate St Ives project was likely to meet the strict criteria for the fund and had been developed sufficiently that a bid could be pulled together within the short timescale. For Tate St Ives, the ambition for the programme was to build on recent successes in reaching new, local audiences but also to extend the reach beyond the immediate geographical vicinity ensuring that people in areas of Cornwall with little or no cultural provision could take part. The partnership with Cornwall Council, which was an obligation of the funding programme, also presented a route through which Tate St Ives could develop connections with new structures and individuals within the Council:

This project presents an early opportunity for Tate St Ives to establish a working relationship with the newly re-structured Communities Directorate.

*With the aims of this project supporting numerous cross cutting objectives for the Directorate including those related to the localism agenda, creative and cultural services and adult learning, partners will have the chance to establish effective dialogue and to pilot and evaluate ways of working.*³⁵⁴

The extract above, from the funding bid document which I authored, reveals an underlying and long term vision for the partnership. In identifying the different areas of policy and intervention which were to be brought together under the Communities Directorate, the proposal hinted at the kind of support Tate St Ives would be seeking in future years for various pipeline projects but in particular for the Phase Two expansion project. As Appendix 2 reveals, Cornwall Council also had a long-term agenda which was linked to the Phase Two development with Council members and officers keen to see the project build on Tate's "impressive"³⁵⁵ programme of community engagement and not revert back to the behaviour which the Council perceived as working in isolation. At the time of the bid development these discussions were not on Tate's radar. Our main concern was gathering as much information as we could to present a convincing case that this was an equal partnership with both parties sharing a coherent vision. The tight timescales and the difficulty in identifying and communicating with new staff at a time of great uncertainty within Cornwall Council had made this extremely challenging. My recollections of submitting the bid were thus of anxiety over both possible outcomes. There is always huge disappointment when a funding bid is declined after weeks of negotiation and preparation but in this case there was a real concern that if the bid was successful, the ambitions of the project might not be achievable.

³⁵⁴ Tate (2009) Learning Transformation Fund Bid Document July 2009

³⁵⁵ Cornwall Council Interviewee 2

Setting up the Look Groups

The celebratory collective mood which followed the announcement in August 2009 of the successful Learning Transformation Fund grant award was rather abruptly replaced with concerns when communications from the managing body NIACE revealed the very tight timeframe in which the project would have to operate. We were already aware that projects would have to be completed within six months but the communications from NIACE detailed previously unannounced and additional activity which each funded project must complete before any funds could be drawn down thus introducing delays to the project implementation.

In addition to the time constraints, the main challenges facing the newly appointed project managers in late 2009 were how to publicise the opportunities and the logistics of setting up appropriate facilities for groups which were dispersed across the length and breadth of Cornwall. Many of these challenges surfaced in the interviews with staff and the focus groups with participants and are documented in the results (Chapter 5). Using a strategy of establishing Look Groups in all the Cornwall Council Community Network Areas with additional groups in St Ives, the Isles of Scilly and within Cornwall Council the project succeeded in creating twenty-two groups in locations which represented a good geographical spread across the region.

Another priority was to establish a project steering group which included staff from Tate, Cornwall Council and University College Falmouth (UCF – Falmouth University since 2012). It was hoped that regular meetings between the

partners with the presence of an additional “critical friend” would ensure the smooth running of the project and create a body who would be well placed to focus on the legacy of the activity. The results chapters reveal that the changes happening within Cornwall Council resulting from the process of becoming a unitary authority constrained the assistance which the organisation were able to offer to the steering group. Difficulties in securing public venues for the project, for example, left Cornwall Council feeling under pressure whilst Tate felt they were not feeling the full benefits of working together and encouraged neither party to seek a long-term partnership. At the same time, cuts to public funding threatening Cornwall’s Adult Education Service and Tate learning budgets presented further serious challenges to jointly planning a sustainable future for the Look Groups. The Look Groups I was visiting at this time were reporting feeling rather invisible to the outside world with no mention of the scheme in Tate publicity material and new members describing how difficult it had been to find out information from within Tate.

Current Activity

In 2012, external consultants were appointed to begin work on developing a new phase of Look Group activity. With issues around the site for the Phase Two expansion having been resolved, Tate St Ives were now looking to secure major funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) towards the provision of new learning and interpretation facilities. HLF’s remit is to “sustain and transform a wide range of heritage through innovative investment in projects with a lasting impact on people and places”³⁵⁶ and the gallery therefore needed to demonstrate a specific heritage focus in its capital funding bid. The

³⁵⁶ www.hlf.org.uk

development phase consulted widely with different audience groups to understand how new facilities and programmes of activity could help visitors to enhance their understanding and enjoyment of the St Ives Modernists – the heritage which the gallery celebrates. The Look Group Network had been identified as an important audience group for consultation due to their passion for learning about visual art, their connectivity with communities across Cornwall and their familiarity with the existing gallery building and digital resources such as the Tate Collection online. HLF investment would also help advance the original aims of the Look Group project which included an aspiration to create a focal point in the gallery where Look Groups could document their approaches to learning, create visual displays of their discoveries and invite other visitors to begin a self-directed learning journey. It became clear through this re-engagement process that the messages I had been reporting from the six Look Groups with whom I had consulted, were representative of the wider network. The consultation recognised a keen appetite for a greater level connectivity with the gallery, for using the gallery as a hub for Look Group activity and the specific focus on the work and lives of the St Ives Modernist artists was welcomed. A bid of £2.6 million for capital building costs and project revenue costs was developed and submitted at the beginning of 2013.

At the Look Group's Research and Networking Day in July 2013, a member of the TSI Learning team announced the successful funding bid outcome and detailed some of the plans for reinvigorating the Look Group Network. These included setting up new or re-establishing groups in areas where they had stopped meeting; inviting groups to take part in learning sessions about the St Ives Modernists which would support groups and individual members in

creating interpretive materials to help other visitors' self-directed learning and using the Look Group Network as a consultative forum for other initiatives.

A new Assistant Learning Curator began working with the Look Group Network in late 2013. To date public progress on the project appears slow. The number of Look Groups who continue to meet has continued to decrease – now just 11 are publicised on the Tate St Ives webpages although the public are invited to contact the gallery if they would like to set up a group. My most recent communication with the Learning team confirmed that the plans to expand the network have progressed at a slower pace than anticipated but that much work is underway to strengthen connections with the existing groups and involve them in other areas of the project such as the gallery interpretation. Given the passion for the activity and the clear message that the groups knew what needed to improve the network and were willing to get involved, I see this approach as a wise strategy. Listening, responding, valuing what already exists and building on the network foundations incrementally will help to build a sustainable future for the Look Groups. If Tate St Ives are to reach new audiences for heritage through this project, however, they will need to keep exploring new connections and venues that will help the network to reach out to new communities and offer them the same opportunities to access and learn from the gallery resource.

Conclusion

The intention of this report was to demonstrate, through an introduction of the main actors within the project, the complexity of public sector and community relations which form the subject matter for this study. Tate and Cornwall

Council are presented as long term partners whose agendas and responsibilities are historically and inextricably interwoven and whose operations are continually influenced and challenged by the unique characteristics of the geography, politics and culture of Cornwall. The chapter has also attempted to map out the diversity of spheres of influence within which the partners operate; demonstrating a range of conflicting and transitory external influences from central government to natural weather systems which constrain decision making, public spending and service sustainability.

This meshing of different policy concerns is indicative of the political environment in which the Look Group Network was conceived and delivered. The findings chapters (Part 2) will reveal that recognising the interdependence of economy, society and environment has helped to contribute to the sustainability of the project. Observations of Cornwall Council's most recent strategies to reduce expenditure documented however, point to a potentially damaging silo approach in which different sectors are being viewed and valued as operating in isolation from one another.

Appendix 2: Report of results from the contextual interviews

The Project and Policy Perspectives

Introduction

This document reports the strategic thinking, decision-making, practice and learning realised by Tate St Ives and Cornwall Council staff in creating a vision for, setting up and overseeing the Look Group Network. It reveals two organisations working within a challenging political and economic environment with shared aspirations for positive change in Cornwall but with a different set of external influencers. These differences inevitably presented challenges to the way in which the project developed and caused the ultimate fragmentation and end of the partnership.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, a series of observations and a set of correspondence. My personal reflections on events which influenced the development of the programme are also included.

The report is divided into two halves. The first explores Tate St Ives experiences – the Project perspective and the second documents Cornwall Council's motivations for involvement – the Policy perspective

Section 1: The Tate Interviews

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with Tate staff. Three interviewees were permanent staff members and one a freelance contractor and together they represent both management level staff with a strategic view of the project in relation to the organisation and those in direct contact with the

Look Groups delivering the project. Three of the interviews were conducted in November/December 2011 and one in February 2013. This later interview was arranged following the re-structure of the Learning team at Tate St Ives with a new postholder and attempted to capture some of the changes that had elapsed within the organisation and to the institutional perspectives on the Look Group project. The interviewees have been labelled as follows: TS which denotes *Tate Staff* and a number to differentiate the speakers. This allows the reader to follow the contributions of Tate staff across the interview data and to demonstrate that the researcher has not just relied on one voice. Gender clues have been removed from these identifiers as they were not considered relevant to the account or the subsequent analysis.

In contrast to Cornwall Council whose Sustainable Communities strategy and localism policies had influenced their involvement in the project, Tate's strategy for working with communities was less defined and its understanding of sustainability was more diffuse. Rather than framing questions and observations around a fixed public sector definition of the sustainable community, the data collection focussed on documenting significant relationships between staff, partners, participants and other agencies and between these groups and the challenging economic and political environment in which the project was operating.

Summary of findings from the Tate interviews

- The Look Group project was something new for the organisation and all the staff involved
- There was unity in the vision that the project would deliver self-led learning happening outside of the gallery but a difference of opinion over how structured the activity should be
- The Learning Revolution funding programme provided the financial means and structure to get started with a long-held ambition but brought with it numerous challenges in terms of timing and staffing
- The data presented evidence of partnerships being negotiated on multiple levels including with Cornwall Council and the Look Groups and that feedback from these external partners had exerted influences over the organisation
- There was a strong perception of the project being instigated and operated within a challenging political and economic environment

The following account of the interview results is sub-divided into six sub-sections which explore the themes of novelty, the role of Tate, formality vs. Informality, the essential project elements, partnerships and external influences and legacy.

1.1: Novelty

The novelty of the Look Group project was described through three interwoven strands: reaching new audiences, new kinds of visual art activity for those audience groups and new partnerships. The way in which the project

developed new partnerships is explored as a separate theme. Here the novelty of the activity and the audience is explored.

As previously detailed in Appendix 1 (Project History) before the Look Group project, the Tate St Ives adult programme had consisted mainly of gallery tours and talks. TS3 described how this kind of passive learning activity had become:

a convention and not necessarily a sustainable convention (TS3)

The issue of sustainability highlighted here is implied on two different levels: sustainability in an economic sense with the organisation having the resources to keep a programme of activity going and sustainability from a learning perspective with individuals having self sufficiency to continue their learning about visual art:

It (the gallery talks and tours) wasn't doing the very thing that inside the gallery we feel is so important which is actually empowering people, giving them the tools to be able to explore and engage with the art work and the themes and ideas around that artwork (TS3)

Whilst all the interviewees talked about the audience development aspirations of the project, it was difficult to pinpoint from their discussions how successful this aim had been in reality and to define who these new audiences were. TS1 who worked closely with the Look Groups defined the audiences as:

people who would probably normally never go to a gallery or would have an antagonistic relationship with the gallery, in terms of "I don't get modern art ...". (TS1)

TS1 also puts forward the idea that it is the nature of the relationship between the audience and the gallery, or indeed between the audience and the art works which is new:

... we have an exhibition on that's fairly challenging in terms of contemporary art and painting. I've met people who think it's really tricky

(...) And to be sitting here and watch these groups of people: there were people in the courtyard, there were people in the gallery here. And I could hear laughter and I could see these debates and discussions and arguments and all the rest and that just made me really happy. (TS2)

TS3 also highlights a new kind of audience relationship that has agency and an ability to influence and challenge the work of the gallery. The use of the term “created” is interesting as it pre-empts some of the discussions within the Look Group participant narratives exploring power dynamics and who was leading the Look Group project – Tate or the groups themselves.

we’ve also created a kind of critical audience for the gallery an audience that have opinions and that are asking things of the gallery now. (TS3)

Also present within this theme was the idea that the newness of the project has persisted. As the quote below suggests this may be because at the time of the interview the project has yet to really fulfil its potential:

I feel that even now when I talk about it, people get incredibly excited about it. It still feels to me as if it is a new model that actually has huge potential. (TS2)

1.2: The Role of Tate

The interviewees were united in their views that Tate contributed a unique combination of expertise and resources to the Look Group project which had contributed to its success which alternative organisations could not have offered. Nevertheless the respondents were clear that the aspiration of the project had been about creating the conditions for self-directed learning. The role of the gallery was in hosting or supporting the learning but not leading it:

Creating something that could survive without the gallery leading but that could be nurtured by Tate (TS3)

... in the end it's not really about an organisation, the organisation hosts it but the potential for those groups to be connecting with other organisations, if it's self-directed(...) we become the host but it's not really Tate. (TS2)

I think some of them (...) would continue even if the Tate had no involvement whatsoever which is great. And I think that's probably about half I would say. (TS1)

There appeared to be two motivations for this 'hands off' approach to the learning. One was a consideration of economic sustainability: that self-directed learning would not entail staff time and thus financial resources. The second was a repositioning of Tate as an organisation that could empower audiences to make their own exploration of art and exhibitions without relying on an authoritative, expert view. TS2 talked about challenging the "binary relationship" between gallery educator and visitor and creating:

...a triangular relationship where you have the art work and then you have two people or more than that and somehow the...what happens between those two people is facilitated by the art work but actually what's happening between them is almost as important as what's happening between them and the art work. (TS2)

TS4 indicated that this attempt to be remote from the learners extended to placing limitations on meeting and communicating with the groups in case it impacted on the learning environment or became construed as direction:

I've only been to a couple of meetings because I think it changes it when I start showing up. (TS4)

The organisation's unique contribution to the success of the project appeared to be bound up in the Tate brand which was associated with quality and the significant resources of a national arts institution:

the fact that it was rooted to Tate has been a massive bonus because I think if it was a Look Group that was attached to a regional gallery, it wouldn't have the same power. I'm not saying that it would be any less effective but certainly the translation of the brand and a kind of sense of

what that stands for, I think for a lot of people has given the confidence to buy into this project. (TS3)

Whilst there was confidence in the expertise and resources that Tate St Ives could bring to the project, the data revealed a sensitivity to power dynamics and in particular to the power that Tate wields in terms of resources and brand. Any perception from the audience that the organisation was in some way throwing weight around could be very damaging:

...in a context like Cornwall there's huge sensitivities. I think there's potentially a massive risk that people would see this as a kind of Tate (...) trying to, not necessarily take over but there's a kind of sense of the overbearingness of the organisation. I think we're trying to get away from the 'we're going to do this to you' and we're trying to suggest that there's a kind of openness and a dialogue and actually cultivate a much more democratic way of working and actually empowering people. (TS3)

Here I include some personal reflections on this viewpoint. An outsider to this project might suppose that concerns raised in the quotation above were rooted in paranoia and wonder whether the public would truly recognise a feeling of being dominated by the organisation. My experience, particularly through my engagement with local audiences in relation to Tate St Ives expansion plans was that this was indeed a view held by certain sectors of the local public. Objection to the gallery extension was demonstrated by, for example, letter campaigns to the media and potential funders throughout the period 2005 – 2008. The view expressed by the community at that stage is perhaps best summarised by a quote in the national press from a local resident who said Tate St Ives were “getting too big for their boots and (had) stopped listening to us.”³⁵⁷ This sustained period of tension between the local community and the gallery left a lasting impression on staff and contributed to the design of subsequent community activity. Whilst there is a danger that the views of a minority are here

³⁵⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/oct/08/arts.artsnews>

projected onto all audiences who visit or have a relationship with the gallery, the Look Group data also provided evidence of this idea of resistance to Tate re-surfacing through objections to providing too much structure to the programme.

It is also worth noting the specification of Cornwall as a context for these kind of sensitivities. What TS3 appears to be saying is that there are a set of circumstances particular to Cornwall (or somewhere like Cornwall) in which an organisation would need to be sensitive to way in which it worked with local audiences. The rurality of the county and the dispersal of the population is one way to interpret this contrast to other contexts but in analysing this idea I will also be drawing on the insider/outsider thematic data from the Look Groups which documents a significant number of Look Group members who migrated to the county and their experiences adapting to new communities.

A final contribution to this discussion regarding the role of Tate seems to respond to TS3's concerns about the interpretation of Tate's activity as domineering and provides an alternative model for positioning the organisation in its local context. Interestingly it can also be interpreted as directly employing the language of complex systems:

we need to recognise ourselves as part of an ecology which includes (...) a whole range of networks, from business networks to cultural ones to (...) [the] educational community...And (...) you need to pay attention to the detail of each of those networks because actually you won't thrive unless you do that and equally we won't be contributing and help the rest of organism to thrive. (TS2)

1.3: Formality and Informality

The previous sub-section has highlighted Tate's aspirations for self-organised learning and supporting rather than directing participants which is suggestive of

an informal learning model. The success of the project in both drawing down public funding and in founding and sustaining a network of learning groups however, relied on a basic structure and a degree of formality. The two main ways that this structure is expressed is through the small number of participants and the comparison with a book group which in turn introduced ideas of shared purpose, sociability and democracy:

I think the original idea was you'd have, bring eight people together and that they would have a level discussion, (...) as in complete equality so that everybody, each of those eight people had an equivalent...were able to offer their opinions in an equal basis so it wasn't about people being taught, it was about an open discussion and (...) sharing responses to an artwork (TS2)

I came up with the idea of a look group because the underpinning element for me was about a self-sustaining group and looking at other models out there like book groups that actually offer that kind of social dynamic, a motivation for people to come together and explore a theme of shared interests. (TS3)

To what extent formality should be imposed on the Look Groups was a source of contention. One perspective put forward was that any external influences would alter the conditions for self-organisation and group democracy and that this could potentially lead to an over reliance on Tate resources. An alternative perspective was that the association of the Tate brand with the project required the organisation to be ensuring the activity was of a high quality and met the standards set internally and by external bodies such as Tate's main funder – the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS). There was also a need to consider how funding invested in the project was acknowledged. TS2, who advocated the non-interventionist approach, admitted that Tate getting “some credit” for the project was important. I remember contributing to these discussions at the time the project was being developed in 2009 by arguing that should the project attract external funding from either public or private sources

then Tate would need to demonstrate evidence of outputs and outcomes and that this would be difficult if the organisation had not considered what these were likely to be nor gathered any data during the project. My recommendation therefore was to structure the relationship between the Look Groups and the gallery which thus introduced an element of formality. My colleagues in the learning team were also in agreement that learners would need support in establishing a relationship with one another and with the gallery and that whilst they were open to the way in which the project would develop, there were elements that they wished to stay in control of:

I think we were clear about certain real foundations that would make the thing be able to operate. Obviously that then developed in ways that we couldn't possibly have anticipated but I think there were anchor points that without which it would have been very difficult to ...see how it could have continued to develop. (TS3)

TS2 admitted that the inclusion of these structural features in the project development had caused concern initially, but having seen how the project subsequently took shape and the feedback from participants has had a change of heart:

I suppose the concern if I had any was about whether the model reverts to a more didactic model than perhaps the original idea. (...) However, I think what I've learnt from what I've witnessed and the feedback I've had (...) that actually to just put people in front of an art work with a bunch of people and just say 'talk' (...)it's a bit like saying you can give people free entry to galleries but would they come? And so I think that in a way that's my naiveté in thinking that you don't have to facilitate that process. (TS2)

1. 4: Essential Project Elements

1.4.1 Venues

One of the key “anchor points” for the Look Group project referenced frequently in both the Tate staff and Look Group data is the provision of venues. As Chapter 5 details, venues were a significant contributory condition to the survival of the groups. A number of the groups which stopped meeting did so because of “venue issues” (TS4) (see also negative case). The provision of venues thus becomes a double-edged sword of both enabling the groups to flourish and at the same time making them financially and administratively dependent on Tate. TS4 described what learning the organisation had taken on board from this situation by revealing a strategy for dealing with existing Look Groups and putting in place provision for any new groups that might be established. The new approach is to negotiate free access to a venue for the group:

We start with the venue and then the group based around that venue rather than basing around a person. (TS4)

TS4 gave an example of a group who meet in a further education venue. The room hire is waived by the institution as they consider it beneficial to be able to reference community use of spaces in their advocacy and fundraising activity. The additional benefit is that students at the institution have access to the Look Group to enhance their learning and this in turn benefits the Look Group by diversifying their membership.

The idea that the group is based around a venue rather than a person acknowledges the role of the venue in the sustainability of groups but is also a preventative measure to avoid the groups serving the interests of a dominant minority. One particular group had been officially “shut down” (TS4) for these

reasons. The group were all friends who were not actively trying to expand the group and chose to meet in a public house rather than a free public venue that would have opened membership to a wider sector of the community. The news of this group being removed from the network appeared then to have travelled to other members – most likely through informal social networks rather than more official communication routes like the Ning or the Look Group networking days – resulting in some groups feeling anxious or confused about where they could or could not meet. TS4 had found that the most effective way to move forward from this situation of hearsay and circulation of incomplete information had been to refuse to respond to questioning on the topic from the groups. This was suggestive that the Look Group communication channels were not robust enough to ensure that an official statement would be circulated, read and understood by everyone involved. To my mind it was again reminiscent of the organisational response by Tate to the letter campaigns in the local media in opposition to the gallery expansion plans in 2005 in which replying to letters was considered ‘tit-for-tat’ and instead a period of face-to-face consultation was instigated to ensure that messages could be clarified and misinformation quashed.

TS2 put forward another related argument about the importance of venue. Whilst all the Tate staff interviewed were agreed that the online presence via the project Ning was a useful communications tool (in stark contrast to the views held by the Look Groups), TS2 advanced this to make explicit the need for both virtual and face-to-face communication:

the idea of a sustainable community also suggests a kind of thriving place, there is a place in it. So I think to use the virtual to connect people back into places seems important. I think you need to reinforce the idea of place, I don't think you need to lose it and I suppose place is an idea of a real meeting point. (TS2)

1.4.2 Co-ordinators

Originally termed Learning Champions, the Co-ordinator role was another element recognised by the interviewees as essential to the success of the project. Each Look Group co-ordinator brings a variety of skills, knowledge and behaviours to the role, it was acknowledged, but the most prized according to the Tate staff was their actual physical presence “at real grass roots level” (TS3) in the community. Word of mouth appears throughout the Look Group data as the single most efficient means to recruit new members to the groups and the Co-ordinator has the knowledge of local networks and information about the project to actually begin putting the group together:

...through a person in a community, on the ground at real grass roots level there's kinds of conversations (...) coming right down to the basics of actually somebody just telling somebody else 'this is a programme, this is where it's happening' and actually reaching a different audience from the one that the gallery can reach... (TS3)

TS1 describes the co-ordinators as “fundamental people to have around” in relation to the communications between Tate and the groups. Without a single conduit, Tate would be dealing with increased communications traffic that would quickly have made the programme unsustainable due to the administrative burden. TS1 also suggests that devolving power and responsibility creates the conditions whereby the group can be resilient to change:

...they (co-ordinators) become the hub around which everything seems to rotate (...) if they leave you've then got a big gap there for somebody else to try to fill but hopefully the groups by that time are sustainable enough to be able to fill that gap (...) getting those people they're pretty key because otherwise it becomes a centralised hierarchy. (TS1)

As well as reaching out to new gallery audiences the co-ordinators were also seen as highly effective in feeding information back to Tate about how the project was working which allowed changes and improvements to be made. One example given was the request for a manual so that co-ordinators could guide their group members around the digital resources available on the Tate website including Tate's online collection. This plurality of views and opinions and having a channel through which they could reach staff was deemed by TS2 to contribute to the "diversity" of the organisation and was highly influential:

there's a sort of backward flow of learning that comes back into the organisation, that changes the way the organisation thinks. (TS2)

1.5: Partnerships and External Influences

Throughout the interviews I was keen to explore the views of Tate staff on the organisation's relationship with Cornwall Council. The funding bid had formally named Cornwall Council as a project partner and a senior officer had been assigned to the project steering group. This commitment to working together was not new – the organisations' ongoing partnership pre-dates the establishment of a Tate gallery in St Ives. But as TS2 states, the Look Group was a new way of developing a "consistent community offer" and having the opportunity to work with parts of the Council who could facilitate community relationships was also groundbreaking. However, all those interviewed agreed

that the relationship had not been as productive as had been hoped or anticipated:

I don't think it's been terribly successful. (TS2)

We thought it was going to be a partnership (...) and there was just complete lack of commitment from the Council (TS1)

A major issue with the partnership was the timing and timescale of the project. The interviewees had been aware of the structural changes happening as Cornwall Council became a unitary authority in 2009 and how the economic climate and dramatic cuts to local authority spending had created instability for their Council partners. The disappointment was not just that there was not sufficient commitment or manpower to secure the resources or support needed for different stages of the project, but also that political changes and the pace that the project needed to progress at prevented Tate exploring with Cornwall Council what TS3 believed to be the “*ideal exit strategy*”:

one of the big steps forward for me was the fact that Cornwall Council were a partner in the project and I think that did offer on the level an element of sustainability (...) given that Cornwall already had provision for adult informal learning it was a way of connecting with existing infrastructure that should allow for that transformation to be further embedded post the six months of the initial start of the project (TS3)

By the time of the fourth interview, in February 2013, with the new Learning team postholder there was a sense that the partnership was very much at an end. The interviewee was visibly shocked when I reported that Cornwall Council employees had taken part in this research project and expressed surprise that offers of assistance towards the project had been made during one interview.

Working beyond the walls and with the investment of public funders, placed the Tate St Ives team under pressure from numerous external influences in key

areas such as quality, safety and accessibility. These external influences included the criteria set by the specific project funder (The Learning Transformation Fund), those set by the organisation's main sponsor (DCMS), UK legislation (for example Health and Safety legislation and the Disability Discrimination Act) and direct and indirect influence from numerous other bodies including insurers and employment unions. As TS1 describes in relation to venues, this required careful thought and planning before the project could even get started:

Every single venue that we went to had to be health and safety checked, every single one. So we had to visit before the meeting (...) and do a health and safety check, a proper health and safety check. Where are the fire escapes? Is there disabled access? (...) So before the initial meetings that we did, someone was supposed to visit Bodmin Church Hall to go do health and safety papers on the building itself because otherwise we couldn't get insurance, therefore we couldn't do it. (TS1)

The approval of venues were in fact just one of a very long list of planning issues which the team had to tackle within a very tight timescale. The team had already been under pressure to make decisions about the nature of the project in order to meet the Learning Transformation Fund application deadline and whilst this had "galvanised" and helped to "catalyse the thinking" (TS3) the receipt of the grant accompanied by a set of stringent guidelines regarding data collection and monitoring was a threat to the success of the original idea:

it became apparent very early on that there'd be quite (...) a hefty box ticking exercise to monitor who was joining the groups, the activity of the group (...) which completely took away from the informality of what we're trying to do. (TS3)

TS1 provided an alternative perspective by describing how the funding from the Learning Transformation Fund highlighted the incompatibility of external funding with the size and organisational complexity of Tate:

people are really excited by the Tate getting involved (...)but actually (...) the Tate doesn't really fit into short-scale, short term projects like that... (TS1)

As well as the bureaucracy surrounding venues, TS1 points to the difficulties in dealing with “the whole Tate system” when carrying out simple administrative procedures. The purchase of basic or inexpensive items like refreshments for initial meetings was one example given:

Yes you can buy biscuits and cakes because it's in the budget, if it's in the budget that's great but anything that's not specifically written in the budget? It's so difficult. (TS1)

1.6: Legacy

The interviewees were all agreed that the most important project legacy was the Look Groups themselves and that the network represented huge potential in building further relationships with local communities in Cornwall:

we suddenly have a much more critical, informed audience who have a connection with the gallery (TS3)

the communities where (...) those Look Groups are based, you know those thriving Look Groups I think they're better and those relationships that people have within those groups are strengthened because of the Look Group so I think that's got to be the legacy (TS1)

There was also an aspiration to sustain the legacy through further investment.

For TS2 sustaining the Look Group required further growth:

What I think we now need to do is go for a big bid to somebody to look at how we (...) sustain it. (...) I think in the end it will die unless we move it into, onto a bigger level. (TS2)

These aspirations for funding for growth have been achieved by securing a Heritage Lottery Fund grant which supports a new post to develop the Look Groups over five years from 2013.

Section 2: The Cornwall Council Interviews

To present the alternative perspective on the relationship between Tate and Cornwall Council and to understand Cornwall Council's corporate vision of the sustainable community and how this shaped the Look Group project, I conducted interviews with two Cornwall Council officers who had been involved with Tate St Ives over a number of years. They had both worked on different aspects of the Look Group project: one in the early drafting of the funding application and the other as a part of the Project steering group. Both point to their previous professional involvement with Tate on the Phase II Extension project as being crucial to their participation in the Look Group project.

Using the same conventions as the Tate narrative data, which allow the reader to differentiate the speakers and their contributions across the reported themes, the interviewees have been labelled CC which denotes *Cornwall Council* followed by a number. Gender clues have also been removed from these identifiers as they were not considered relevant to the account or the subsequent analysis. To provide additional consistency with the Tate results, where relevant I have included some of my own reflections on events referred to by the two interviewees. Data was collected from two hour-long interviews.

Of the three data sets – Tate, Cornwall Council and Look Group members - the Cornwall Council interviews proved the most difficult to group thematically. The themes presented here were very strongly present in the data evidencing a

united organisational vision or common experiences, but the difficulty lay in finding parity in the descriptions used. My interpretation is that the different specialist roles the officers performed within the Council influenced the perspective, experiences and the language they used to describe these. Another observation worth recording is that one interviewee was able to bring additional local knowledge acquired from a lifetime of living in Cornwall in contrast to the other officer who had moved to the region as an economic migrant but who was able to give more detailed information about Council operations owing to their strategic position within the organisation. Whilst rich in detail, the Cornwall Council data is limited to just two interviewees with very different perspective which has presented challenges in creating a overarching, unified narrative. These were, however, the only two Council employees who had the level of experience of the project and knowledge of the relationships between Tate and the Look Groups.

Summary of findings from the Cornwall Council interviews

- The Look Group project fulfilled some strategic objectives for the Council in terms of localism and culture
- The project took place during a period of major internal re-structuring within the Council and the interviewees provided evidence of subsequent and anticipated change
- The data presented evidence of Cornwall Council having external agendas imposed on them and also actively seeking new organisations to partner with to improve and diversify services and operations

- Participation was seen as an essential driver of community sustainability and successful democracy and Cornwall Council were keen to invest in and experiment with ways to increase participation levels

The findings are divided into five thematic sub-sections: the partnership with Tate, internal change, external influence, participation and perspectives on sustainability. The difference in the number and subject of the reported themes reflects the difference in the volume of data collected (two interviews compared with the four Tate interviews), the more distant role the interviewees had in relation to the project and their connection with a greater diversity of community and sustainability initiatives within their institutional confines.

2.1 : Partnership with Tate

CC1 described an evolving relationship between Tate and Cornwall's local authorities. At first, the officer experienced a very distant organisation with little interest in the concerns and priorities of Cornwall's communities as reported in initial dealings with the gallery. Having recently been appointed to a new post, the interviewee had written to cultural and heritage organisations to request a meeting to explore how to work together:

...everyone else was really enthusiastic and said "Oh yes that'd be really great, let's talk" ... But the Tate - I got a letter back and it (...) basically said "we don't need to have anything to do with you, our agenda strategies are set by central government not by you, little District Council". So I thought 'alright then, you know, ok I'll back off' (laughs) and so I played, you know, I played with everyone else and not so much with the Tate.

CC1 pointed to this distance in terms of both personal connections and in strategic focus that led to difficulties when Tate began looking for support for its plans for an extension:

And then of course they came knocking on the door for planning permission for an extension and it was like 'ooh right and who are you again?'(laughs). And I think it was quite a wake-up call because I think they assumed that everyone knew that Tate was fantastic and that everyone would want the Tate, to put money into the Tate and to give them more land and all those sort of things. And I think the wake-up call was yes we all recognise that Tate was brilliant in terms of turning around St Ives and the whole economic regeneration... but they didn't have the voters. (CC1)

CC2 revealed less about previous dealings with Tate but described the personal strain experienced whilst trying to meet the demands of the project during a period of re-organisation for Tate who once again appeared to be pulling in a different direction to the Council:

...the opportunity to fulfil their ambitions I think relied heavily on me trying to find rooms free of charge across the county and that coincided obviously timing-wise with the upheaval of moving from seven councils to one. So actually talking to managers of libraries who...were just in the process of finding their own feet....added a level of complexity that I think, ideally we'd have done without

Whilst CC2 described the project as fulfilling “their ambitions” rather than any sense of a shared vision or joint aims, there is evidence from the project history and the interview data that there was some joined up thinking driving the project. CC2 drew parallels between the Look Group Network and Cornwall's Community Network Areas:

the idea of having community networks is broadly similar... creating a network of individuals within a geographical area... a community of place, where you bring together Cornwall Councillors, town and parish councillors, voluntary and community sector... (CC2)

The nineteen Community Network areas were established in 2009 to drive Cornwall Council's localism agenda. The areas are based on “groupings of parishes and electoral divisions”³⁵⁸ and since the dissolution of the district

³⁵⁸ Cornwall Council Website <http://www.cornwall.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=12439> last accessed 13/03/14

councils form the main channel for Cornwall Council to engage with local communities. A Community Network Manager works alongside the local councillors in the area to ensure local views are taken into account in the design and provision of public services ranging from community safety to transport and regeneration issues. Responding to the aims of the Learning Transformation Fund programme which advocated a strong local authority partnership element to projects and the coincidence of the project planning phase with the establishment of the new Council, the Look Group Network had created one group in each Community Network Area. These political divisions closely mirrored the geographical spread which Tate was aiming to achieve with the Look Group Network. CC2's comments illustrate that both Cornwall Council and Tate were, at the same time, trying to think through a dispersed offer to benefit the whole county.

In contrast to the positive aspects of achieving joint aspirations through partnership, CC1 referred back to the history of the relationship in evidencing why Cornwall Council were involved in this specific Look Group partnership:

there was a concern that we would fund the extension and they could then go back to being what they were before (...) having got the extension why bother then carrying on doing all the community stuff ?

The quote above suggests a lack of trust on Cornwall Council's part and indicates that the way in which the relationship between Tate and Cornwall Council had developed in the years immediately preceding the Look Group project had been heavily influenced by Tate's extension plans and dealings with the community.

Mirroring the views of the Tate interviewees, the Cornwall Council respondents also viewed the project partnership as being at an end. Look Group

communications had ceased and CC1 and CC2 asked me for information regarding the surviving groups and future funding plans which appeared indicative of a fragmented relationship. CC1 requested that I communicate to Tate the Council's willingness to revisit the accessibility of free public venues. This was good news but I was perplexed that the officer did not choose to get in touch directly. I duly passed this information to the Head of Learning at Tate St Ives but by this time (December 2011) the project was at an inactive stage and the team were evaluating what ongoing support they could offer the groups. As detailed in Section 1, my later interview with the new team member revealed this information had not been circulated widely and no action had been taken to either repair the lines of communication or take advantage of the goodwill offered.

2.2 Internal Change

The establishment of the Look Group project took place during a period of major structural and political change within the Council. The shift from seven councils to one unitary authority had involved all the usual upheaval and change in personalities and political agendas associated with a Council election but with the added complexity and anxiety of widespread redundancies and movement of teams between and within the new directorates. The interviewees present the changes in a broadly positive way. Here, however, I was aware of a sense that the interviewees were being careful to remain 'on message', referring to their contributions to strategy papers and giving the official, corporate line as might be expected. One aspect of the Unitary council's operations which both interviewees talked about in favourable terms was the move from being a delivering organisation to a commissioning organisation. The benefit of

“devolving” (CC2) services outside of the Council allowed organisations with greater expertise or relationships of trust to receive investment and support:

We don't want to be in a position (...) of delivering those type of services. We want to move to be more of a commissioning and enabling organisation.

CC1 recognised that there were different “interpretations” of commissioning activity being employed by Cornwall Council – from the specific delivery of outputs and outcomes, for example those relating to health or social care, through to a partnership based model where a broad alignment in aims could result in an external partner managing a devolved budget.

we would give the money to a partnership who then say this is what our partnership does but how they then deliver it, (...) the Council doesn't get involved in the fine detail. (CC1)

An example given was the community based art programme FEAST Cornwall which, with the backing of Cornwall Council, draws down an annual budget from Arts Council South West to make grants to small-scale creative projects illustrating that this kind of commissioning can result in further devolution of aims through a chain from Council to the very local organisations. Another related shift in activity cited is boosting the powers of town and parish councils. The example given is that Cornwall Council could consider releasing certain community assets such as car parks with the idea that parking revenue could be used to run other local services such as public conveniences.

As the interviews progressed both respondents opened up a little more and reflected on the challenges which the structural changes have brought to their own areas of work. CC1 talked about a dramatic reduction in staff in one Council department as a result of the merger of district councils which led to a loss of connectivity with community organisations:

I think, unfortunately, the way things have gone, from when (...) you had the districts and the county, the districts were very much more in amongst everyone else. We were far more local, we got to know many more of the local communities because there was more time, it was a smaller patch, for us to go to local meetings and support things. (CC1)

For CC2 the challenging effects of the structural changes within the organisation were felt most keenly through councillor apathy and disenfranchisement:

as a member of Cornwall Council you're one of 123 councillors, it's a terrific number and quite a few of them were former district councillors and I think they found it easier, obviously over time, to influence decision making within the organisation than they do now. (CC2)

Another example of structural change referenced and which was particularly relevant to this study was a more recent re-structure in which the Culture team were moved from the Communities directorate to the Economic Development directorate. This was of particular interest as the original plan to include Culture within the Communities directorate had been seen by my colleagues at Tate as a major step forward particularly as Communities also included the Library service and Adult Education and there were hopes that this would lead to improved communications and planning for the Look Group project. The decision to move the Culture Team once again had been taken in recognition of the mismatch in operational scale and focus and also the skills of staff who could be drawn in to assisting on projects. The Communities Directorate were focussed on large-scale revenue services such as waste management and the fire service whereas Culture needed particular expertise in understanding and documenting the economic value of culture in line with the requirements of the European structural programme funding the majority of Cornwall Council's cultural portfolio at this time.

2.3: External Influence

This group of quotations illustrates the theme of external influences directing the work of Cornwall Council and in some ways parallels the discussions running through the Tate data regarding the numerous pressures from outside the organisation which ensure accountability and quality in the public sector. There is one significant difference however. Where the Tate data pointed to these external influences as a necessary evil or a tick box exercise that needed to be carried out but which drained resources and time, the Cornwall Council data suggests an organisation actively seeking influence from outside as part of its mission to raise the profile and reputation of the Council. This section relies on CC2's interview data. CC1 did make numerous references to one external organisation who had a strong influence on the work of their service and suggested this direction was welcomed and positive. Identifying this organisation, however, could compromise the anonymity of the interviewee so direct quotations have been omitted.

CC2 provided a range of suggestions of how the Council is tackling this issue of Councillor disappointment and these are grouped and detailed in the subsection which explores participation below. More representative of CC2's view of external influence are the two quotations below. The first illustrates the Council having an agreed strategy of connecting with central government:

they're not going to come to us, so we've got to go to them. So we've knocked on the door of Whitehall and we've given various presentations to senior civil servants, ministers, secretaries of state and it's really started to take hold to the extent that the phone does ring, the e-mails are coming through from people in Whitehall saying 'What do you think? If we were to announce this as a pilot would you be interested?' (CC2)

The benefit of this relationship with Whitehall was in being able to influence policies from a rural perspective as well as increasing the status of the authority within the local government professional sphere. CC2 described attending a conference of officials in the south west and being offered numerous compliments from colleagues on different initiatives and how useful it had been to get this response from professional peers.

2.4: Participation

The area where CC1 and CC2 had the strongest overlap in their discussions was around the theme of participation and its fundamental importance in strengthening democracy, culture and communities. The theme encompassed ideas of volunteering and community engagement and the strong message coming from both interviewees was of Cornwall Council's aspiration to see a shift from representational to participatory democracy but with a belief that communities would need direction and encouragement in identifying the individuals who could lead this shift. CC1 described these potential community leaders as "sparks":

I think sometimes you are looking for those real, you know, sparks within the community – those individuals who've got the energy, who've got the ability to you know bring people together and with that enthusiasm keep people on board and um...I don't think there's enough of those or if there are they are keeping their head down and it's a hard job working with councillors, the voluntary and community sector to identify those leaders who are in the community..(CC2)

CC1 then presented a range of different initiatives to improve participation. The Community Network Area Managers and staff are positioned as visible and dedicated support for existing councillors but also a means to encourage potential election candidates to step forward. The Big Society also surfaced as a policy initiative with CC1 describing the applications for the funding of

Community Organisers who would be “direct(ed) into the areas where there does appear to be that apathy and get people fired up”. Co-designing public services was referenced through the Design of the Times programme and the Big Design Challenge which both aimed to find ways to use communities to both identify the challenges they faced – for example, a lack of parking or anti-social behaviour – and in finding solutions. These ideas could then be developed as social enterprise models with investment from the Council. Throughout the discussion it was clear that CC2 felt passionately that local people should be encouraged to participate more in public life and that Cornwall Council should play an active role in “coaxing” involvement:

Disappointingly for the officer however, the structured programmes quoted appeared to have lacked visibility. I agreed with this conclusion. Most of the initiatives were unfamiliar to me and I felt, as someone with a keen interest in community sustainability and connection with numerous networks across the region that I should have known about them. The Big Design Challenge had been delivered through a website and appeared to have suffered from the same challenges as the Ning social media platform developed for the Look Group members to use to stay connected. As I explore in Chapter eight and Chapter nine, the lack of connectivity with familiar and regularly used social media and without an ongoing programme of engagement and training to encourage new users, the Ning site was invisible and without new content.

Both interviewees made a connection between the Look Group model and Cornwall Council's aspiration to inspire greater levels of democratic participation. CC2 pointed to the Look Group's strength in developing positive relationships:

the resilience question in terms of Cornwall can only be addressed by (...) individuals being self-sufficient, communities coming together and anything that kind of moves us in that direction and kind of starts to foster great relationships, you know, positive relationships is no bad thing in our book (CC2)

CC1 went further in identifying cultural activity specifically as bringing together a combination of both diverse relationships and interest. The cultural organisation was also highlighted as having a particular role in encouraging participation because of their neutrality:

... do these cultural organisations whether they're galleries or theatres or whatever..should they be looking at their role as a vehicles for change (...) because they are places that people tend to trust because what goes on the walls or activities or whatever ..they're not seen on the whole as being of one political persuasion; they are neutral spaces (...). And if you are in a position of trust like that, perhaps there is something which is around you can influence in a way and to look at the ways you do that is the next sort of challenge. (CC1)

CC1 also offered some interesting insight into volunteer motivation and behaviour within different organisations. There was, the officer felt, a distinction to be made between getting involved and being responsible:

You may get a volunteer who is happy to come and do certain sorts of activities but they don't want to join a committee, they certainly don't want to become treasurer, they don't want to become chairperson. So there's a thing around people doing a bit but the idea that you'd actually take on governance positions, you know, the committee positions and all that is just not that attractive.

Some organisations with a certain “kudos” like Tate and the Leach Pottery were able to attract trustees and committee members but others would struggle to remain relevant to a fast changing society. CC1 concluded that communities would have to make difficult decisions about which cultural and heritage assets they retained and sustained:

All things have a natural life I suppose and one of the things (...) that is a real challenge for us is to think that perhaps some things won't exist later

on. If you can't make your organisation relevant to today's people, today's generation you can't force people to keep things going.

2.5: Perspectives on sustainability

Running throughout both interviews is an emphasis on economic and political sustainability as expressed through ideas such as community self-sufficiency and business sustainability with Cornwall Council trying to promote both by reducing its role in service delivery.

CC1 talked about her fear of “dangling the carrot of council revenue funding” because it encourages organisations to change and grow beyond their means. She highlighted two dangers for organisations. The first is the increased administrative obligations which are attached to grant funding:

they have to do things the Council want them to do... they will have to tick boxes, they will have to do evaluation, they will have to do certain things in certain ways. The problem is, they've not needed it up till now – if you then give it to them, in five years time they will have formed themselves to need it...

Also of interest here is the idea of unsustainable growth expressed through the idea of expanding to meet a temporary supply of funding leading to dependence. The second danger CC1 highlights is that accessing council funding makes some organisations feel they can stop the time-intensive but community focussed local fundraising like cake sales, raffles and events:

...the fundraising that you do... it brings the organisation together, you're all working together to get that money... the fundraising for those sorts of museums, is local fundraising... so your profile is there all the time. (CC1)

Sustainable communities (...) they've got to represent the rest of(...) their own culture, own town. You are not sustainable if all of you are over seventy (...) a community needs to have diversity, it needs to have different generations, it needs to have different ideas, it needs to have

different strengths, it needs to have a whole pool of things which are available in that community.

Unlike the Look Group discussions which appeared to overlook the role of the natural environment in achieving community sustainability, the Cornwall Council interviewees linked the idea of the sustainable community with green energy and were confident that there were numerous opportunities for Cornwall through solar, wind and wave technologies. CC1 talked of Cornwall's self sufficiency in energy production and how the natural environment could provide great advantages to the region in economic sustainability:

...we want to be the green peninsula. Lots of opportunities there given our geography (...) essentially we could in 10 or 20 years (...) be a net exporter of energy. (CC2)

CC1 referred to a £15 million scheme for Cornwall Council owned buildings to install photovoltaic roof tiles and explains that investment in capital investment projects like these are the authority's way of supporting the longer term future of community or cultural organisations by either reducing revenue costs or creating new income streams:

how we're doing it is to say to those organisations well can we invest capital in your organisation so you actually have a smaller revenue core? So if we can help you build a cafe and reduce your energy costs with photovoltaics or any of those sorts of things, if we can help you to generate more income so your revenue need is reduced – that's what we'll do with that capital. So how we're going to use it is very much around, you know, business development sort of side. (CC1)

CC1 makes a further environmental connection by referring to tourist travel and plans being made to try to reduce congestion and queuing which could have an additional social benefit through deeper engagement with place:

What we are trying to do with the itinerary idea is the idea that people come to a place and stay. And so there's enough to do in that one area rather than driving

around all over the place. There is that idea that actually just getting into places on a deeper level rather than flitting about the county spending most of your time in traffic jams and queuing in car parks.

The “itinerary idea” has now become part of the agreed outputs of the Arts Council funded Cultural Destinations programme for Cornwall which commenced in June 2014.

Report conclusion

The results from the contextual interviews reveal the challenging and highly pressured environment in which the Look Group Network was conceived and developed. Both organisations were working on a new project in addition to their core activity during a time of major organisational re-structure and economic uncertainty. The addition of rigorous funder reporting demands, the experimental nature and scale of the ambition resulted in a project partnership from which both parties were keen to depart. The end of the external funding grant marked the end of the partnership and there was little appetite to renew ties which might have helped to grow the Look Groups to benefit the agendas of both organisations. The project partnership thus appears as a marriage of convenience, a contractual arrangement designed to unlock short-term funding rather than a long-term, sustainable union.

Tate and Cornwall Council do of course have a much longer history of working together. The foundation of their twenty year long working relationship based on shared geography and aspirations to provide residents and visitors with a year-round cultural offer belies the very different political spheres in which the two organisations operate. Tate St Ives is responding to multiple external

influences including directives from centralised Tate departments who in turn create strategies based on the demands of DCMS. Cornwall Council is also at the behest of central government departments and regional bodies and tries to pre-empt the disturbance which these influences will bring to the organisation's operations by seeking out external partnerships.

Appendix 3: Results from the Look Group discussions

The Community Perspective

Chapter Introduction

This chapter describes the experiences of Look Group members as participants within the informal learning project and within their communities of place. The chapter is divided into four main sections. Section 1 provides a summary of the results and an overview of the Look Group Network. Section 2 presents the Look Group Participant results as a series of individual case studies. Section 3 documents the results from my negotiated feedback sessions with each participating group and Section 4 provides a discussion and data relating to the groups which stopped meeting – the negative case.

Section 1 – Summary of findings and Look Group overview

Summary of findings from the Look Group discussion groups and observations:

- This is a strong social network – sustained by a web of overlapping face-to-face interactions criss-crossing Cornwall
- Art provides a ‘way in’ for newcomers to find “like-minded” individuals, and develop confidence in communication and co-operation
- Support and organisation help with initial conditions but rules, obligations or identities created or perceived by external bodies can have a destabilising effect

- Strong association between issues related to the sustainable community and the processes of the Look Groups
- Age and major life events in actively looking for community ways to connect
- Data identified with ideas of social and economic sustainability but not environmental sustainability

Overview of the Look Group Network

Look Groups varied in size from 2 to 20 members. Most met in a public venue like a library, school, community hall or gallery though some meetings took place in members' homes. Initial training in areas such as conflict resolution and group management were provided by Tate St Ives for the original Look Group co-ordinators during the project's first stages but from that point onwards each group developed its own mode of operation; from the regularity of meetings to the topics for discussion. Tate have retained a level of support for the network which includes the provision of guidelines for group co-ordinators, financial support for meeting venues and free entry to the exhibitions. The degree to which this support and guidance was accepted, followed or regulated varied from group to group.

Meeting the Look Group Network

I first heard the term "Look Group" when I was part way through writing the funding bid to the Department for Innovation Universities and Skills which would eventually provide the first phase of investment to set the project in motion. The Head of Learning at Tate St Ives was, she told me, using the term as a working name for a planned series of groups of self organised learners across Cornwall

and I remembered feeling both relieved and excited by the potential of this new concept. The idea to set up discussion groups who would then have an ad hoc relationship with the gallery had been through numerous manifestations and given different names over a period of two years but the close association with the concept of a book group, both in name and meaning, helped all of those involved in the project development to understand how the network might work and to find the language to engage participants, partners and funders.

The comparison with a Look Group turned out to be accurate with the groups of learners directing their own democratic exploration of art in informal settings. Many of the Look Group members said they described the Look Group to friends or potential new recruits as “like a book group” and some had even found out about the project from their own book groups. This kind of marketing - through social networks and existing groups and making comparisons with this popular informal learning model turned out to be very effective in recruiting members but not in broadening Tate St Ives’ appeal to new audiences as I realised when I first met the Look Group Network. The opportunity to meet members of the Network came in November 2011 when I was invited to Tate St Ives to a Look Group Day. This was the second time all the groups had been invited to the gallery to take part in talks and discussions and it presented a good opportunity to make informal social contact with some of the groups. A recent meeting with the Learning Team at TSI had revealed that they were concerned that my research methods (interviews, discussions and observations) could be intrusive and unsettle the participants so we agreed that I would try to establish a relationship with some of the individuals first before making a request to visit their meetings. The programme for the day included

artist-led talks on key works on display in the gallery, discussions led by some of the Look Groups and opportunities to talk to TSI staff about the future of the Look Group Network. I moved between sessions dipping in and out of different discussions which though focussed on very different topics, were all characterised by a passion for learning and energetic questioning. It was a presentation by a Learning Curator and Look Group co-ordinator about how one group were using the Ning social networking facility which proved to be the most interesting and which is documented here by a research journal entry:

I sat in this room of mainly middle-aged women listening to well-educated voices articulating their problems with this informal learning programme which had gained them free access to (and in some cases transport to) an art exhibition of international repute and my heart started to sink. Were these the “under-represented” and “hard-to-reach” audiences that I had described in the original funding bid and promised that the project would reach out to? Was following these groups going to make for an interesting research project? I felt angry on behalf of my former employer that an attempt to do something for the benefit of the community was firstly being hijacked by those who didn’t really deserve it and then being heavily criticised. A few days on and I now feel quite different. I am starting to see the world from outside the institution and how being told how to do things by a faceless monolith could be frustrating particularly if I was trying to have fun. I am also gaining more sympathy for the audience. White, educated women might not be typically classified as an impoverished group but in Cornwall where there are few cultural opportunities and as travel is expensive, the definition of disadvantage may need to be more accommodating.

Research Journal entry December 2011.

This journal entry is useful as it presents some of my earliest observations. The first is my sensitivity to the high proportion of women participants. The second observation is my self-reflexivity in observing the shift from being an institutional insider to an outsider and how this impacted on my empathy with the experiences the Look Groups describe.

Section Two: Look Group Participant Results

The accounts which follow use full transcriptions of the recordings of semi-structured group discussion with five Look Groups. In order to preserve anonymity, participants in the discussion are identified with a number and initial to correspond with the order in which they speak and gender eg F3 and M1. The gender identifiers have been included but the names of the group locations have been removed. The decision to include the gender identifier was made on the basis that group diversity was a significant preoccupation for the groups and I wanted to evidence which groups had male voices within their membership. I was also able to observe gender differences in perception relating to experiences within the Look Group and more generally in community life which I wanted to be able to distinguish by identifying the speaker more clearly.

For each account, the discussion is grouped into sections which explore finding out about the Look Group, motivations for joining, support from Tate and other organisations and perception of community and sustainability. Alongside data from the group discussions, observations of group dynamics, correspondence with the group co-ordinators and staff at Tate St Ives supply additional detail. Each report is accompanied by a table with key statistics and a map of group relationships. The map is a simple attempt to situate the relations between members revealed to me through the discussions - for example family connections or membership of an additional interest group. They serve as illustrative material more of the depth of the discussion than of the real connections but may assist the reader in understanding the group dynamics observable at the time of my visit.

Look Group 1

My first contact with the co-ordinator and a few core members of Look Group 1 was at the Tate St Ives Look Group event in November 2011. They were very enthusiastic about taking part in the research and had already e-mailed some initial thoughts about what makes a sustainable community before I came to join their meeting in February 2012. My overall impression of the group was that these were people who perhaps would not have met socially but for their shared interest in art. Within the structure provided by the Look Group, however, they had come to feel comfortable and enjoy each other's company. Those without an art background were particularly appreciative of those who had some technical or historical knowledge of art whilst members with an art background liked the opportunity to share their expertise but equally to be challenged by new thinking.

Area Profile

Look Group 1 are based in a coastal, urban community which has the third biggest resident population in Cornwall. A report by Cornwall Council describes the area as "full of contrasts" highlighting the visible displays of wealth of the yacht marinas situated immediately next to residential areas with high levels of worklessness³⁵⁹. With attractions like museums, shopping, festivals, the harbour and beaches, the area attracts year-round visitors from across and beyond Cornwall. The visual arts have a strong presence with numerous private and public galleries providing exhibitions. My impressions, as a visitor to the town, of a young, urban, vibrant community were borne out to some degree by the statistics. The settlement is one of the youngest and most densely

³⁵⁹ Cornwall Council (2009) *Strategic Investment Framework Evidence Report*

populated communities in Cornwall.³⁶⁰ It is also growing at a rate above the county average. The presence of two major education institutions within the area accounts for the large number of 20-25 year olds in the area (10.5% of the total population). Three members of the group revealed connections with one of the institutions: a current student, recent graduate and a member of the Chaplaincy team. Whilst appealing to young people, the area is also being promoted as a destination for retirement with a growing housing sector providing sheltered or adapted properties. Residents in the age groups 55-59 and 60-64 are, however, “slightly under-represented”³⁶¹ compared with the Cornwall average which may be reflected in the empirical data by the actions of some of the older members of the group who were actively seeking out opportunities to socialise, connect and take part.

Account of the Discussion and Observations

Mechanisms and motivations for joining the Look Group

All the members appeared to have found out about and joined the Look Group during the first wave of advertising (print, press and word of mouth) in 2009. There had been such demand for a Look Group in this location, with numbers far exceeding the 15 member maximum suggested by Tate, that initially there was a waiting list. I had heard from staff at Tate St Ives that eventually some people had split to form a second group but the members I met were unaware of this. The group had therefore gone through a number of changes in

³⁶⁰ Source Cornwall Council Community Network Area Profile
www.cornwall.gov.uk/idoc.ashx?docid=daea6839-a8e8-4265-bafb

³⁶¹ Cornwall Council (2009) *Strategic Investment Framework Evidence Report*

membership and venue in the first 12 months of the project but had since settled into a routine with mostly the same people attending each month.

There was evidence that members of the group had previous experience of this kind of activity. One member talked about being part of a University of the Third Age group (U3A). At least three other members were taking part in a book group and two other art groups were mentioned. Likening the activity to a book group in the advertising had helped to attract some members. Socialising, learning and enjoyment were the reasons most cited for getting involved and the Look Group also presented opportunities for people who were new to the area to make social connections. Two members, one an artist and the other a student of fine art talked about the benefits of meeting and talking to people who were not involved with art.

Meeting structure and group management

The two - and only - rules for meetings were to always have tea and biscuits and to try not to talk over one another. They were not consciously following any of the training given by Tate St Ives to the group co-ordinators in the early days of the project. From the twenty plus members at the start there were now thirteen on the members list. The general consensus was that between eight and ten was the ideal number for a discussion.

The overall impression was that they didn't like to be too organised and preferred to take cues either from the previous month's discussion or be led by the accessibility of exhibitions:

F5 *...So we did memorials and that led on to war artists...*

F3 *Or sometimes it's because there's a specific exhibition on which gives us a chance to go and look at the exhibition together and discuss it after which is really good, I really like that.*

F1 *Or we can go on our own...*

The group appeared to prefer a collective discussion rather than one member researching and presenting though some members had volunteered to be a facilitator and members with technical or art historical knowledge of art were sometimes called on to provide coaching on topics such as perspective or the lives of particular artists.

The venue that the group use was very important to them. The public gallery space provided a light, inviting space with a kitchen for refreshments and out of hours access. The exhibitions had provided a stimulus for discussion when nothing else had been planned. Some members compared it to other venues which they use for similar community activities and concluded that the gallery space was not just practical but inspiring.

This is a very uplifting space. (F5)

It was not just the environment of the venue which was of importance. Having a third party arrange and pay for the venue took away a lot of anxiety and extra work organising and financing an alternative for the co-ordinators. The activity thus remained free for members and the members continued coming to meetings.

Technology did not play a big role in meetings. In the past, use had been made of the computers in the library below and a laptop was used once. Instead books, posters or leaflets were used or collective memory of a shared exhibition experience. In the discussion about the Simon Fujiwara exhibition which I observed, members used a free A5 size exhibition guide produced by Tate St Ives for exhibition visitors to illustrate some of the works they wished to discuss. They then relied on memories of the different rooms in the exhibition to stimulate their conversation.

Support from Tate St Ives and other organisations

The group were pleased to have an association with Tate St Ives. Free entry to the exhibitions, support with venue and the Look Group 'reunion' day for all the groups in the Look Group Network were cited as examples of the support they benefit from. Equally though, the group were happy to have been 'granted' autonomy. M1 who had been the co-ordinator of the group at the time of this decision was not completely certain what autonomy really meant but felt that it reinforced the way the group operated:

What does that mean? It means that they've let go a little bit which basically we kind of did, to some extent, did our own thing anyway, under their auspices I suppose. But I had a phone call from [name removed] before she moved on to offer the chance for this group to go completely. And there was never any tight ties anyway. I'm not quite sure what it meant.
(M1)

Health and Safety laws had been used by Tate St Ives as a reason for not encouraging meeting in members' homes and a discussion about how this impacted on their choice of venue illustrated that there was still confusion and anxiety over what jurisdiction Tate had over the group and what the consequences might be if they broke their association.

Perception of community and sustainable community

When asked to describe “community” the members of the group began by answering this question with abstracted answers with positive connotations such as sharing, interdependence and involvement. These views were then challenged by one member with an alternative perspective:

It makes my heart sink a bit actually (F3)

The other members questioned this idea and began to unpick the idea that community is an overused or “loaded” expression or that there isn’t much of it around.

There was some debate within the discussion about whether the Look Group constituted a community or not. Some members made strong cases that the Look Group had strengthened their own personal community of support and that if this is their experience, the Look Group must have potential to have a similar impact on other members’ lives.

For me ...I was living on my own. I needed to start finding some sense of support and community and people that I thought ‘oh that’s so and so’ in a really...well, friendly way ...and obviously this topic interests me but I needed more than that and in a way community is giving you that feeling that you are glad you’re here...in [name removed] (F1)

M1 and others by contrast saw a distinction between community and communal.

It’s a gathering and interaction. But community is a loaded word. (M1)

F1 told the group about her experiences trying to get involved with the launch of a new Neighbourhood Watch Scheme in her street. As she was the only

person to attend a Police briefing meeting, she had invited her neighbours to her home to give them details of the initiative:

Absolute pandemonium. The sense of community was nil. So I couldn't even open my mouth for more than thirty seconds before it started...this is true. And all really it was for, was to try to keep the place tidy and if there was something a bit amiss to let each other know. But they were wanting railings, a new telephone box..it was absolute....So the community spirit at [name removed] is not good. (F1)

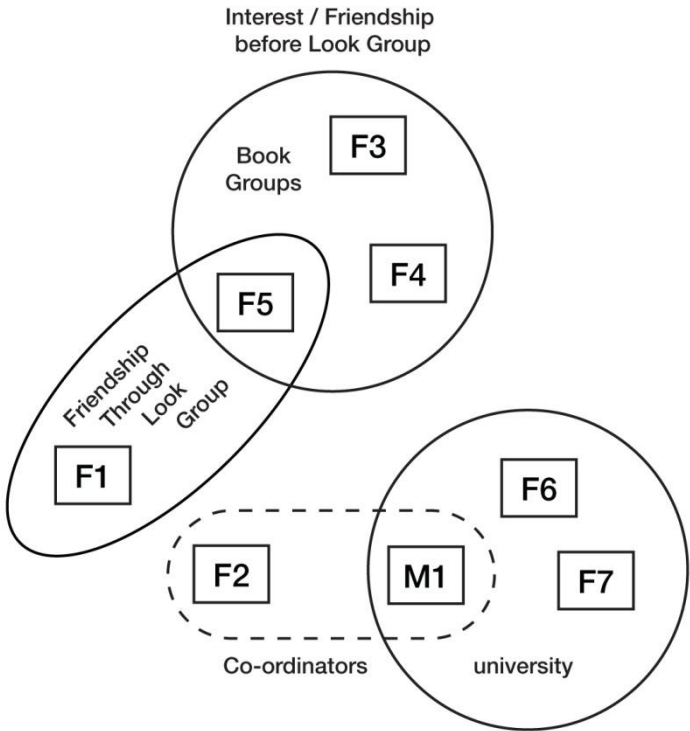
The difficulty in defining community had a big influence on the group's response to the question about what makes a community sustainable. It was clear that the emphasis was on the community and how you sustain it rather than a community which has evolved or been changed to embrace sustainability ideals:

But you see it's hard to say what the community means. Which one could you mean? Because there's so many different ones. (F1)

Look Group 1 Key Statistics

Members	14
Female	13
Male	1
Age range (from observation)	20-80
Number attending meeting	8

Figure 9: Look Group 1 Map of Relationships



Look Group 2

Look Group 2 met each month in the local adult education centre. The group co-ordinator had attracted attention and praise from Tate St Ives by regularly using the Ning social media site to post blog entries and connect with other groups and it was through the Ning that I made contact with group and arranged to meet. When I joined their meeting three new members were attending for the first time which seemed to be marking the start of a new chapter for the group after numbers had dwindled over the three years the group had been operating. Throughout the discussion the idea of sustainability – whether expressed explicitly or implied – was that of resilience, trying to keep things going and avoid isolation.

Area Profile

Look Group 2 were located in North East Cornwall. The main town, from which Look Group 2 derives its name, provides services and employment for the rural communities surrounding it. With the advent of the railways, the town developed from a small port to resort and remains a popular tourist destination. As a result employment opportunities are often seasonal and unemployment peaks in the winter months. There is not much to attract the out-of-season visitor or to provide entertainment for residents. Some services are more easily accessed across the county border in Devon as highlighted in this Cornwall Council report:

*The [name removed] Area is remote from the rest of Cornwall and residents are as likely to look to Devon, particularly Bideford and Barnstaple, for strategic level services and facilities unavailable in the area, as they are to other settlements in Cornwall.*³⁶²

³⁶² Cornwall Council (2011) Community Network Area Discussion Paper: Preferred Approach

The Look Group echo this issue in the discussion when they describe a visit to a sculpture park in Barnstaple and talking of their visits to St Ives in the far west as being significant undertakings especially when summer visitors add to road congestion and parking difficulties.

This was my first visit to the settlement and I recorded in my research log some first impressions:

[name removed] looks like the kind of place where it would be difficult for an outsider to meet or get to know people. Town centre is dominated by hotels and guesthouses. Library/One stop shop is located across river from town centre. Couldn't see much evidence of community generated events or activities. (Research log dated 10/07/12)

Some of these impressions are confirmed by the empirical data with members living in different villages spread around the area and talking about how difficult it is to get enough people together from dispersed communities to create an activity. When there are opportunities for learning or socialising, members report that they are often hidden or hard to promote.

Account of the Discussion and Observations

This account is based on the transcription of a forty minute recorded discussion and observations made at the meeting with six Look Group members.

Mechanisms and motivations for joining the Look Group

In contrast to Look Group 1, where the members talked about wanting to almost shake off their usual communities and introduce new perspectives through conversations with people from different backgrounds or professions, Look Group 2 members talked about how difficult it was to identify people with an interest in art, how valuable this was for their practice and how leaving behind previous opportunities had left them feeling isolated or incomplete.

I sort of didn't link up with other people interested in art so a good opportunity to sort of meet people on the same wavelength otherwise you feel very isolated.
(F2)

It's kind of what I was kind of missing, I wanted to be part of something like that
(F1)

This isolation which F1 and F2 describe here is further evidenced by the fact that these members discovered the Look Group via advertising whereas for all the other members it was word of mouth through social or other support networks.

As well as the focus on art, the informality of the activity was a strong motivation for wanting to get involved with the group. F5 describes how she approached her local U3A group for art learning but was frustrated by their lack of flexibility and did not return.

Group dynamics

F1 and F2 both attended art school and described themselves as artists. In this group they are already distinctive as they are much younger than the other members and they also grew up in Cornwall but they further develop this difference by talking about their experiences as part of an art community and displaying their technical and art historical knowledge. F3, in her role co-ordinator, also brings out the distinction as she tries to showcase to the new members the artistic knowledge that the group have to draw on. Whilst F4 and F6 are respectful of the knowledge the two artists have developed through their art training and enjoy the learning experience which this enables for them, they resist becoming students, citing their own experiences creating art and benefitting from discussing art to promote what they can bring to the group. They also express disappointment about their perceived lack of an art education.

I always regret when I was at school, I think I was quite good at art but I never went on and did any further examinations or anything. And my teacher always used to put my work into their exhibitions and things but no one ever, ever encouraged me to go further with it when I was at school and that's a huge regret because if someone had pointed me in the right direction and my parents probably didn't recognise it either, so I missed out really and it's too late now (laughs) (F6)

Meeting structure and group management

F3 was very much the driving force of this Look Group and had employed different strategies to ensure its sustainability from placing adverts and reports in the local parish magazines to attract new members to creating a welcoming environment with coffee and homemade cake. She explained that meetings

were run according to the guidelines provided by Tate in the “Welcome to Look Groups Handbook”. Within the handbook is a suggestion that groups have a co-ordinator and a rotating pool of meeting facilitators who take turns to prepare and present on an agreed topic but F3 explained that the group had adopted a more relaxed approach to managing their meetings recognising that leading the discussion can be “scary”. Instead someone will start with an idea or an artist’s work and the conversation will flow from there. F1 and F2 echoed the benefits of the democratic, interactive approach:

That’s how it happens, you hear about this artist and... you learn something new. It’s very relaxed and... you feel like you’re having a conversation rather than sort of...’I’m here to talk about dah dah dah...’. It’s very much you can bounce ideas and talk, it’s more relaxed. (F2)

Preparing things in advance was also not considered essential as artists or works of art could be looked up on the internet using the facilities available in their meeting room and which I observed working well. I did wonder, however, whether F3’s laissez-faire approach to meetings might in some ways be fuelled by a fear that these younger members might stop coming if more structure was introduced.

Support from Tate St Ives and other organisations

As with the discussion around meeting management, F3 was most aware of the support from Tate and wanted new members to be aware in particular of their role as a potential arbiter in case of any disputes. In addition to support from Tate, Look Group 2 had also been guided in the early days by staff from the Adult Education service which accounted for the choice of venue - the happy result of which is the good learning tools they have available in the classroom.

F3 communicated her fears that financial support for their venue might not continue but remained confident that the group will continue.

Perception of community and sustainable community

The discussion about community moved quickly from the abstract:

People communicating, supporting each other, making friends... (F4)

People joining together to...to have an interest in, the same interest or to help each other (F6)

to the lived experience with members talking about their own communities. There was a lively comparison between Village 1 where F1 lives and Village 2 where all the new members live. The sense of community in Village 1 was described as being “a bit hit and miss” with the influx of incomers who do not mix with the Cornish highlighted as the problem. Village 2 by contrast was described as a “fantastic village”. Places to meet were highlighted as being significant, particularly the pub and village shop both of which Village 1 has lost but Village 2 retained:

F1 introduced the idea of how communities form around groups of a certain age or stage in life, describing how she felt excluded from certain activities because she didn't have children.

F2 and F5 both talked about community as being something you can opt in and out of. For F2 this is because she has returned to a village where there are family connections and she wants to maintain some privacy whilst F5 hints that

her experience of the political dimension of communities had given her a negative perception of what community is about and she preferred to only join in with groups where she has a shared interest.

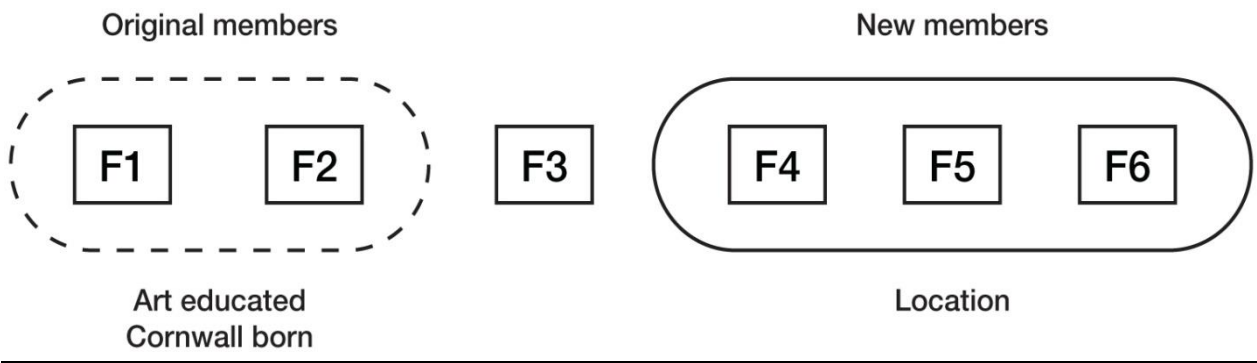
F3 was able to highlight examples of how being part of a book group had led onto getting involved in helping other sectors of the community and to recognising the benefits of a collective voice in trying to effect change:

We raised money for the local hospital so you feel as though you're doing something useful... and if there weren't groups like the reading group or the Look Group or the other groups then very soon everybody would be very isolated and not in a position to help anyone else when help was needed...or even have...feel like they had any power over what's happening in their community...you don't have any say in the community, do you, unless you join in to a degree and have the support of others with similar ideas or you know, you have to fight your corner for things that matter...(F3)

Look Group 2 Key Statistics

Members	8
Female	8
Male	0
Age range (from observation)	25-70
Number attending meeting	6

Figure 10: Look Group 2 Map of Relationships



Look Group 3

Look Group 3 meet in a further education college every month in a town located in the far north of Cornwall. This was another group whom I met at the Look Group day in November 2011 and they stood out as a group built on strong friendships. Many of the members had known each other before joining the group but new connections have also been made and sustained. All the members present on the night I visited, live in small, isolated villages or hamlets and the make-up and identities of these communities seemed to fascinate them as examples of both co-operation and harmony and of isolation.

Area Profile

In transcribing the recording of this group's discussion, I had a number of unfamiliar geographical references to look up. These were mostly small villages or areas to which members had individual social connections or had visited as part of the group. Living at the opposite end of a long county accounts for my unfamiliarity with the place names, but the connections the group had, across quite a large area, were also evidence of the dispersal of populations in this part of Cornwall. Cornwall Council's Population Profile for the area notes it is one of the least densely populated areas in Cornwall. It also notes, in contrast, that the area is well connected to the rest of the UK via the A30 and this was reflected in the discussion with members of the group talking about visiting London and Plymouth to see art exhibitions.

From my walk around the town, I observed visual evidence of the sustainable retail and services which make the town a busy hub for the rural communities it

serves. There were a high proportion of established independent shops and notice-boards were full with posters for community-led activities from the gardening club to choral society concerts.

Account of the Discussion and Observations

This account is based on the transcription of a 68 minute recorded discussion and observations made at the meeting with eight Look Group members.

Mechanisms and motivations for joining the Look Group

All those present at the meeting had found out about the Look Group via word of mouth. F1, the group co-ordinator, reported that the original group had experienced a decrease in membership early on in the programme but an artist from the Tate St Ives learning team had been sent in to assist. Following a meeting with just two members, the power of personal networks brought eight new members the following week and group membership has remained strong since. It was believed that only one member (not present) had found out about the group from information in the local library.

There was lively discussion about the posters produced by Tate St Ives to help members promote their groups. F4 had brought a copy to show me, I think in the hope that she could voice some criticisms. The poster which was designed by Tate St Ives (Figure 7) features images of adults taking part in Look Group activities. There are two photos of a Look Group in situ and two of activities in a

gallery setting. It seemed that no one in the group really liked the posters but it was difficult to pinpoint what the issue was. F1 thought they were “not very eye-catching”, F5 described the look as “a bit institutional” and F6 talks of the poster she put up in the village having been “taken down”. For M2 the issue was around representation and how Tate had tried too hard to reach too many potential audiences:

...it would be very hard to decide...to produce something that would appeal to each one of us as an individual and across all the groups...But then you can always see the boxes had been ticked in terms of 'Have we got ethnic variety there? Have we got age variety there?'

There was a lot of agreement with F2's reaction to this description that everyone pictured in the poster looked “a bit young”. Posters had been put “up and around” but with an already healthy membership, it was felt that they had not really been needed.



The poster is a collage of four photographs showing people engaged in art-related activities. The top-left photo shows a group of people sitting around a table in a cozy room, looking at art. The top-right photo shows three people standing in front of a wall covered in art. The bottom-left photo shows a man and a woman looking at a large tree sculpture. The bottom-right photo shows a group of people sitting on a sofa, looking at a large abstract painting on an easel.

Join a Look Group

To find out about a Look Group near you contact lookgroups@tate.org.uk or telephone 01736 796226 www.tate.org.uk/stives

For any adults in Cornwall interested in talking about art. No knowledge of art required.

TATE
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FEDERATION OF EDUCATION AND ARTS STUDENTS

Fig. 11 Look Group recruitment poster

The members talked at length on the topic of getting involved with the Look Group. Wanting to know more about different styles of art and artists was the most cited reason. One member had recently “crawled out of the other end of (a) PhD” in art history and missed the discussion about art. Two kinds of isolation surface in the discussion: insularity occurring within a well-established group and isolation from London. F4 talked about her experiences in the painting group that many of the members belong to reflecting that if the same people meet repeatedly, the group can become “quite insular and her motivation for joining was to have a “wider influence”.

F6, M1 and M2 all openly talked about their sense of isolation being in a rural environment after living in London. Even the opportunities for exploring culture more locally such as the recent tour of the British Art Show to Plymouth and Tate St Ives which F1 and F4 highlighted, could not compare with London in terms of finding both the exhibitions and the people who share the interest in art. For M2 it was the organisation or expenses involved in getting to London that added to the sense of isolation as he missed the informality of just hopping on a tube and visiting a gallery.

M1 reported similar feelings but talked about the less populated but well-connected character of his new home village that has helped him to find the Look Group and a new art-interested community to socialise with:

I don't want to be cut off in Cornwall. I actually grew up here as a child but I've spent all my professional life away and I spend my time going to London. (...). I think if I didn't do that I'd be really cut off. But it's really lovely living in a village with someone (F2) and knowing (F7) and so on who live in the area. So I realise there are people down here, like-minded

people and this is kind of a vehicle for me to be able to talk about art ...
(M1)

One way that the members seemed to be overcoming these different feelings of isolation was through their discussions around contemporary culture and in making connections to public debates or media references:

I think also you notice things around you more, you know, you think 'oh yes I've heard that name, we were discussing him a few weeks ago'. (F1)

F1 went on to describe how they were discussing the architecture of Zaha Hadid at one meeting and the following day F1 had learnt of Hadid's death. There was a lot of agreement from the rest of the group with members talking animatedly about how these media references help them to remember their discussions and to promote individual research and investigation, sustaining their interest in a topic. M1 talked about how the previous month's meeting inspired his own exploration of the topic and F6 describes how her individual experiences within the group then impact on her home and family life:

And you take it back into the home(...) you know you have this sort of thing lying around (indicating a book) and someone brings you that and a grandchild picks it up and it spreads and there's paints in the house and it's all...lovely. (F6)

Look Group 3 were a well-connected group. They had all known at least one other member before joining. F1, F2, F3 and F4 all paint together in an art group, F2 lives in the same village as M1 and introduced him to the group at their last meeting, M2 is the husband of F4 and F5 and F6 live in the same

village and were introduced via another member of the group (not present: F7) who also attends the art group.

The group admitted that they do not talk much about themselves during the meetings. F6 talked about how this delayed her sense of belonging, referring to a visit to a gallery a few months previously as being the first time she had felt part of the group because they had all sat down to have lunch together. This led onto a discussion about how feeling comfortable and self-confident at meetings is an important factor in group sustainability. The idea of putting themselves in the firing line for criticism is challenging but ultimately empowering:

you are opening yourself out because if you sit here and you produce...whether it is 'I love the shard' or 'I love the gherkin' or 'I have no..I find conceptual art very difficult' whatever it is...You're putting yourself up to be kissed or slapped and you have to get over it. (M2)

As a newcomer to the group, M1 is at first on the edges of the discussions with F1 admitting he is “going to be lucky to get a word in edgeways” but I observed him use the extraordinary nature of the discussion as a means to present his personal and professional experiences to the group in a way that the previous meeting would not have allowed. He intervenes in a debate about education in the UK with what M2 describes as a “confession” that he spent 30 years of his life working in art education.

As previously highlighted, the perception of a difference between artist and non-artist was again present in the discussions. The group defined an artist as someone who is actively creating art. The distinction between those who have

received formal training was also made but was less prominent than with other groups perhaps because the amateur artists were in a majority. Instead members discussed their experiences of the British education system and how key skills such as being able to draw a straight line influenced whether they continued with art or not.

Throughout the discussion there were different instances of members articulating a tension between wanting to connect with new people, perspectives and knowledge but also being protective of what they have within the group and fearful of change. For F6 diversity of age in the group is important as she points to the benefits of engaging children and young people in art through their parents:

these sort of groups ought to be open for young parents and not just people who are retired who have a little bit of money to get here and things like this (F6)

F1 and F2 appeared defensive at the suggestion that this group has not reached out to other potential audiences:

Well anybody can come ...it's just that people don't... (F1)

Meeting structure and group management

As the group co-ordinator, F1 described the democratic process that had shaped the way meetings are structured. Members had decided together where and when to meet and plan in advance what topics to discuss. The member who came up with the idea would usually “start off” the discussion but

sometimes it could be more of a “free for all”. F1 reported that there was never any problem filling the allotted time.

The group had been on a few outings to exhibitions together and usually included a slot each month where members could report on any gallery visits they had undertaken independently between meetings. F4 and M2 had hosted a Christmas social event last year and it was hinted that this might become an annual occurrence.

The group were not using the Look Group Ning, due to time constraints and not feeling comfortable with the medium:

I know some of us do use various social networking things but generally I think we are of an age where we don't use social networking. I think e mail is about as much as lot of us do... (F1)

Support from Tate St Ives and other organisations

As with previous groups, there was a lot of appreciation for the provision of a meeting room in the FE College by Tate St Ives which simplified the organisation of the group in terms of both finances and ease of access for all the members. When F2 suggested that they could meet elsewhere if funding was withdrawn, F1 revealed her anxiety about using an alternative way of funding the venue hire – subscriptions – and how not having to worry about this has contributed to the group's sustainability.

There were mixed feelings about connecting with the rest of the Look Group Network. On the one hand there was recognition that remaining independent

from the network could result in insularity and on the other a feeling that they value their independence and should not be forced into social interaction. To date the only contact had been at the Tate St Ives Look Group Day at which M2 had sensed a feeling of competition between the groups. The rest of the group appeared not to have noticed this rivalry at the time but M2's report stirred defensive feelings in F1:

True, you become quite protective of your own group actually. It's interesting, it's very true I hadn't considered that before but it is true. You're sort of 'this is our little group' (F1)

Perception of community

After briefly listing features of civic life such as libraries, public toilets and sporting associations, the conversation quickly moved on to a discussion of community as place. As everyone was familiar with each other's home village they were able to draw up imaginary boundaries to define their communities.

M2 began with a description of his village green as a hub for community activities. Other group members were able to identify their community hubs or features of the local environment that make community interaction possible such as post offices, churches, schools or pubs. For F1, her local pub located three-quarters of a mile away was not part of her community which shocked F2 who pointed to F1's regular visits for pub quizzes:

That is not part of our village and we don't consider it to be part of our village... We go up there for quizzes but it's very much the [name removed] contingent that go up and then other people come in. I mean we

always say if it wasn't for the [name removed] contingent going up there, half of the things wouldn't happen.(F1)

The impact that incomers have on community was energetically debated. The consensus was that people moving into the community needed to join in but not take over and that the existing population should provide ways for incomers to join in without “putting pressure on people” (F1).

Members explored how family ties can both constitute community and create boundaries between and within communities. M2 talked about the strong family connections in his village and how he feels excluded from this:

they have a different quality of the community than I have. They belong in a way that I don't and never will. (M2)

F1 who was part of this village family by marriage was shocked at this and pointed to the fact that she had little in common with her in-laws and that many of the family only see each other at funerals. In response M2 talked about how easy it is to re-connect with family members after many years compared to finding out which individuals in a new community he is going to be able to “share a joke with”.

Parenthood is also something which was highlighted as both uniting and dividing communities. M2 and F4 talked about how their local school has “it's own community” (F4) distinct from theirs “probably because the mothers are a bit busy” (M2). This echoed F6's earlier point about young parents not taking part in the Look Group. M2 explored this idea further through his observations of how parts of his community have branched off to form new groups of friends who they met through their children.

F1 drew a parallel between these communities of interest and the Look Group:

It's what you have in common with each other isn't it, that brings you together and if happens to be your children or whether it happens to be the fact that you like to test your brain matter at the quiz, you know, that's what draws you together as a group. It's what's drawn us together as a group. (F1)

Whilst parenthood was seen by some as dividing sectors of the community, M1 highlighted the importance of family life to sustaining communities:

we rely on young families and young people that have children to sustain that heritage. (...) it can only be a sustainable (community) if you have the heart of a community...you have facilities for them for young people and so on or else (...) they just leave, they get scattered.(M1)

Engaging with this idea of generational difference, F2 questioned whether the quest for community itself was a product of ageing:

I wonder when you start feeling this need for community because I think when I was young, I had no need for a community. (F2)

F2 is retired and highlights this as a reason that she is able to engage with activities and join in more than someone who is in work. M2 agreed that seeking community is age related and compared this with his teenage self who settled for those around him whereas in later life he actively selected the community that he wanted to be part of.

In considering the idea of a sustainable community, F5 also pointed to the importance of different generations connecting and passing on traditions of joining in and participating:

So is sustainable about continuity...about having that continuity from one generation to another. (F5)

M2 questioned the fragility of that continuity and wondered whether it fell to just one individual to keep things going:

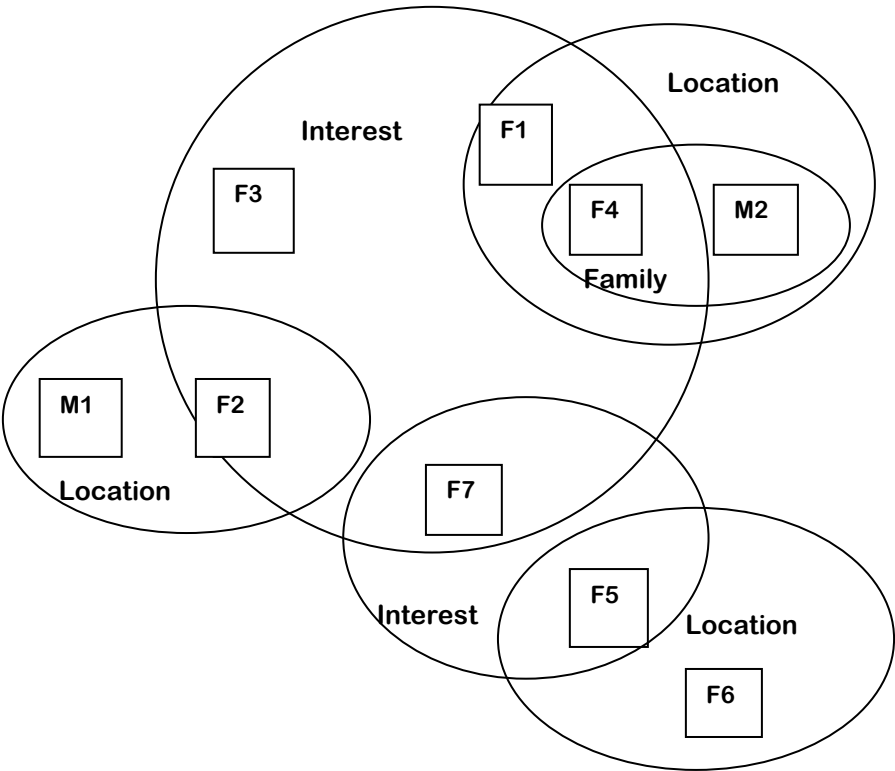
Who would have to leave your community for it to fall apart? Is there any one person who...? (M2)

Look Group 3 were the first group to identify the sustainable community with any environmental concerns though this was in the form of a very quick reference to energy from M2 after which the rest of the group then returned the conversation to social aspects of sustainability such as places to meet, gatherings and participation.

Look Group 3 Key Statistics

Members	10
Female	8
Male	2
Age range (from observation)	50-80
Number attending meeting	8

Fig.12: Look Group 3 Map of Relationships



Look Group 4

Look Group 4 met at the home of their group co-ordinator every month. They were the only surviving group in the network to meet in a home setting and they were also unusual because they met during the day, on a Saturday afternoon. The group's catchment area is very broad as personal connections and the attraction of their daytime meeting slot had pulled in members from across Mid and West Cornwall. I had met the group co-ordinator and some of the members at the Look Group event at Tate St Ives to establish a relationship before my visit, which in the event, had been moved to another member's home. This meant that the group was slightly smaller than usual but precipitated a rich discussion.

Area Profile

Whilst the membership of the group extends beyond the boundary of the community network area, in the interests of consistency the area profile is centred on the urban centre. The town is the main service centre for a Community Network Area in West Cornwall. With a population in excess of 33,000 people, the area constitutes the sixth largest of the Community Network Areas by inhabitants. The town itself with a population of over 11,000³⁶³ is well connected to the rest of Cornwall but acts as a gateway to some of the most remote communities in Cornwall on the Lizard peninsula.

A Royal Navy base is located on the outskirts of the town with personnel housed on and offsite in local communities. In 2011, Cornwall Council became one of the first regions in the UK to sign up to a government organised armed

³⁶³ Cornwall Council (2010) *Population Profile* <http://www.cornwall.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=20177>

forces community covenant scheme. Described as “a voluntary statement of mutual support between a civilian community and its local Armed Forces Community”³⁶⁴ the covenant outlines how Cornwall Council will support service personnel in working with local communities in areas such as volunteering, mentoring and working with schools.

As one of the oldest towns in Cornwall, the settlement has retained a number of ancient cultural celebrations including the famous festival of the Furry, or Flora Dance. The town museum was cited as an example from one of the semi-structured interviews with Cornwall Council officers as a feature of community life which local people had to take responsibility for either through raising a precept or through volunteering and fundraising in the light of reduced service budgets. The future of the Museum has since been secured and the building now looks set to become part of a new cultural quarter for the town. The adjacent former Community Centre has been bought by the Cornubian Arts and Science Trust, the directors of which are Sir Nicholas Serota, Director of Tate, his wife, the curator and writer Teresa Gleadowe and arts entrepreneur Karen Townshend.³⁶⁵

Account of the Discussion and Observations

Mechanisms and motivations for joining the Look Group

Of the four members present, three had heard about the Look Group through word of mouth. F2 had learned about the project from a friend in St Ives with

³⁶⁴ Source Cornwall Council <http://www.cornwall.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=29345>

³⁶⁵ Source Falmouth Packet 3rd October 2012
<http://www.falmouthpacket.co.uk/news/9961357>.

whom she attended a textiles group. I recognised the name of the friend as she had been a member of Tate St Ives Community Liaison Group perhaps signalling that the information F2 had received had been through networks fed with information directly from Tate St Ives. F2 had then been responsible for recruiting F3 and F4.

Well I came because of my dog. I was walking my dog. He fell in love with (F2)'s bitch. (F4)

F1 had heard about the Look Group through the initial advertising but had not been able to join in immediately because all the groups met at night and she was unable to drive in the dark. She reported that she had been made an “extraordinary” offer by Tate St Ives to provide a taxi to and from her nearest group in Penzance but declined on the grounds that this would have been too expensive to accept. She remained keen to join a group and had hoped to be connected but had only heard about Look Group 4 and its daytime meetings by chance when mentioning it to a friend who works for Tate.

Later in the discussion the group attempted to piece together how the other members of the group came to join, revealing how strong social ties and overlapping interests had played a key role in how the group came to fuse.

Whilst the consensus for joining in was social, all four members expressed this idea slightly differently. For F1 it was a passion for art conversations which she felt helped her to “explore ideas” and the group had helped to sate an appetite fuelled by online art discussions and not getting enough student discussions when undertaking her Open University course in History of Art. F2 had moved

to Cornwall in the last five years and missed the cultural opportunities that London had provided when she lived there. She described returning to London regularly to see family and art exhibitions and saw the Look Group as somewhere to share these experiences. F3 was motivated by meeting people with shared interests and broadening her knowledge of art. She was particularly appreciative of the information that other members passed around at meetings about exhibitions or other art events revealing how her joining the group has created opportunities to access to new networks.

All of those present reported being involved in some kind of creative practice. When I arrived at F1's home she showed me the collection of her most recent paintings that she had hung to present to a commercial gallerist. F4 asserted her "lapsed" artist identity as a reason for joining the group:

I'm a lapsed artist at the moment but you know I was an artist and I think I still am but I'm just not practising so I thought this would just be keeping my toe in.
(F4)

This comment was met with a swift counter-assertion from F2:

Yes in fact we are all artists in our own way (F2)

This echoed conversations from Look Group 2 and 3 where there was a noticeable tension between members founded on their difference in interpretation of the artist identity.

Meeting structure and group management

In most cases, it has been the co-ordinator who describes how the Look Group meetings work on behalf of the rest of the group. This was the only group visit I made where the co-ordinator was not present for the discussions so F1 and F2

provided the majority of the commentary on how the discussions are structured and the group is organised. I wondered whether F5's absence also made the members better able to reflect on and express appreciation for her contributions to the group as there were a number of compliments throughout the discussion which did not surface in the other meetings.

(F5) makes an excellent co-ordinator, holds the whole thing together and gives everyone respect and time and makes sure that none of us hog it or whatever and it really works (F1)

The informality of the learning and the potential for both individual research and group conversation were highlighted by F2 as being the main characteristics of the group:

it's nice because you can look things up and you don't feel you've got to get everything absolutely right. You can give your opinion. But generally speaking I think that people aren't terribly biased, they've got very open minds that they take on what other people say. (F2)

Carrying on this idea, F1 described how the process of making connections between artists, art works, ideas and movements developed suggestions for subsequent meetings:

And then it takes you where it takes you because you can imagine it goes all over the place doesn't it (laughs). And then very often out of today's discussion, for example, may come the next artist because we might find a link to somebody. (F1)

Support from Tate St Ives and other organisations

Whilst acknowledging the support that F5 must have received in setting up the group, F1 and F2 were not very enthusiastic about Tate St Ives' involvement:

I wouldn't want it not to be there, I'd like to see them do more things for us.

Without the provision of the venue, there are perhaps less obvious benefits of an association with Tate. F1 went on to talk about the Look Group day in November 2011 as being a benefit of membership but described, using very similar language, the same activity I had recorded in my research journal (see Chapter 3 - Meeting the Look Group p2) – a discussion about the Ning which was “hijacked by people with an axe to grind”. This “uncomfortable” experience was followed by disappointment when, owing to a timetabling clash, very few people turned up to take part in the discussion which F1 and other group members had spent time organising. She concluded that it would be good to do more activities at Tate St Ives with which F2 agreed:

Yes because you would feel you were part of the community then. And a central place and connected to....(F2)

The group knew very little about the Ning as a means to connect with the rest of the Network. F1 was a regular user of online art forums and discussion groups but only communicated with people she had already met. She describes her aversion to social media networks like Facebook for its potential to broadcast information to everyone and not target ideas or messages to those who would particularly like to receive them.

More positively, Penzance Library which houses the county's main art collection was highlighted as a particularly strong resource for members with competition for materials even within the group:

We denude the Penzance art library of any subject we're doing.(F1)

Perception of community and sustainable community

As with previous groups, the members began to unpick the idea of community by listing its key features which included houses, schools, pubs, places to meet, voluntary associations and clubs. F1 turned the discussion to the lived experience describing how the village in which she lives has many of these key features – pub, shop, village hall – but lacks community. Her community, she reported, was based on interest and as a result she needed to travel further afield to Newlyn, St Ives and Truro to meet friends who shared her passion for art and music. Later in the discussion, F1 tried to explore why she did not feel connected to her otherwise likeable neighbours and concluded again that it was due to differences in interests, which in turn were probably underpinned by differences in education:

And we've also had a level of education that a lot of people have not had the chance to enjoy and that makes a big difference to how you live your life I think. (F1)

F2 talked about “joining in” and putting in “effort” to get connected with her new community when she moved there. She reported joining a residents’ association and making clothes for the annual Charter Day parade. She described how she can now walk to the post office and be greeted several times by name and viewed this as a measure of her success in integrating with the community. For her, this integration was linked to personal safety as someone living on their own:

But it's sort of effort as a kind of safeguard, you know, that I've got a neighbour if I've got an emergency or you know that sort of thing. (F2)

F4 seemed to echo this idea of getting involved with community for self-protection though in her case it was protection from isolation or unhappiness:

because I live on my own I'm actually, I'm sort of seeking (community) out so that I don't become this, this grumpy old woman with a plastic bag coming out of the supermarket...(F4)

F3 had found it difficult to settle into her new village after moving to Cornwall three years ago as she has not been able to find "likeminded" people. She expressed nostalgia for her early married years when her social life in a village revolved around the family:

I haven't got a dog, I haven't got children, I haven't got all those things which made me friends in my previous life. (F3)

In considering the idea of the sustainable community, mixed housing, transport and employment opportunities for women and young people were the most important features. F1 also highlighted the importance of having "people who are prepared to work within the community to make things happen". (F1)

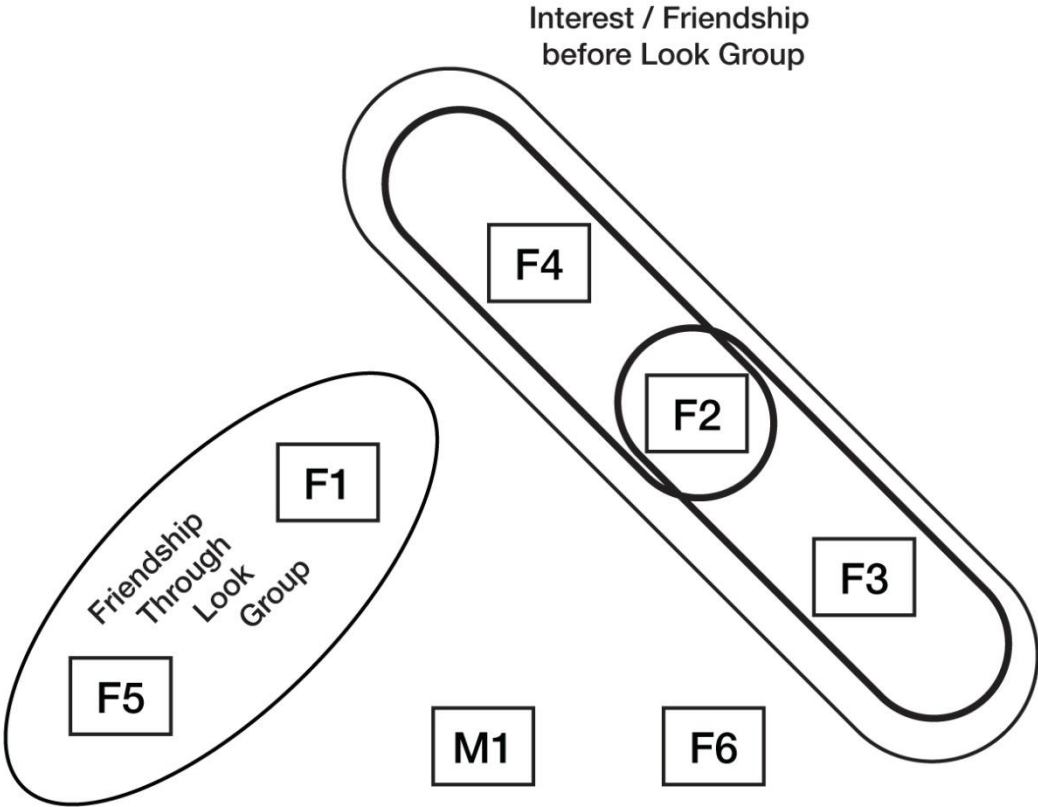
Having been rather quiet during the discussion about the workings of the Look Group, F3 contributed energetically to the debate about participation in community sustainability. Referring again to her past village community, she described how she and her husband were the driving force behind many facilities in the village as their family grew up:

we were the first young couple in the village and then gradually more people came in, younger people. And we started the nursery, we started the playgroup, we started the after school clubs, (...) we started youth club, that's right. And we've sort of gone on and taken over from the older people but it's very difficult to nurture young people when they see that's there's an older group doing a very efficient job. (F3)

Look Group 4 Key Statistics

Members	11
Female	8
Male	3
Age range (from observation)	50-70
Number attending meeting	4

Figure 13: Look Group 4 Map of Relationships³⁶⁶



³⁶⁶ Please note that due to the small size of the group at my first meeting with LG4, I have also included members present at the negotiated feedback.

Look Group 5

Look Group 5 are based in the far west of Cornwall and at the time of my first visit were meeting in a gallery in the town. I had made contact with the group using contact details supplied by Tate St Ives and eventually secured a meeting after both writing a letter to the co-ordinator and sending an e mail via another member. I was particularly curious to meet this group as they were the closest group geographically to my own home and the group which I might have considered joining. Look Group 5 were the most formal in structure and the discussion I observed had an atmosphere of an adult education class rather than a social group even though the data collected revealed that many of the members had enjoyed social connections with one another prior to joining.

Area Profile

Look Group 5 were located in the biggest settlement in Cornwall Council's West Penwith Community Network Area. The area, which covers over 300 km², includes some 15 parishes which together form the fourth largest population of all the Cornwall Community Network Areas. The network area also includes one other town which has its own Look Group.

With a large number of artists living in the town, culture and the arts have a strong profile. There are three galleries which are popular visitor attractions displaying art ranging from the nineteenth century to contemporary installations. An annual week-long festival in June, which revived an ancient solstice celebration, typifies the involvement of creative practitioners in activities and events which bring communities together.

The local economy is reliant on tourism and many towns and villages in the Network area are characterised by seasonal influxes of visitors and job opportunities which are not sustained through the winter months. The popularity of Cornwall as a destination for purchasing second or retirement homes and the additional demands this places on the housing market and home prices is an issue felt across Cornwall but I was surprised that Group 5 were the only Look Group to mention it. Statistics reveal that the percentage of second homes is significantly higher in the area (7.1%) than the rest of the county (4.6%) and nationally (0.7%).³⁶⁷

Account of the Discussion and Observations

This account is based on the transcription of part of the 30 minute discussion and observations made at the meeting with eight Look Group members. Due to equipment failure, there was a break in the recording so field notes have been used to supplement the account.

Mechanisms and motivations for joining the Look Group

Most members had found out about the Look group through word of mouth with neighbours and friends cited most commonly as the source of information about the project and in particular F3, the co-ordinator being the central hub around which she had assembled friends and contacts.

³⁶⁷ Penwith District Council (date unknown) Local Development Framework Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report Appendix A Evidence Base

Well I heard about it from a friend, (F3) because I don't take the local paper, don't listen to local radio I'm afraid ...I'm a bit of a....recluse. And (F3) told me about the Look Group and I said 'oh I'd be really interested in joining that' and she said 'oh well if you'd taken the local paper you'd have known'. (F1)

Two members mentioned multiple sources of information about the Look Group revealing the rich networks and connections that the group has access to:

I can't remember if it's because I do voluntary work at the Tate or whether it was because I read about it in the Cornishman (F3)

..well two things, we (F1) and I went to the Literary Festival where they had a kind of literally a presentation, [name removed] presented some works and someone else was sitting next to her and they discussed it and so we learnt about it that way. And then (F3) also...I'd met (F3) and she introduced me to the idea as well. So I got it (...) two ways. (M1)

A passion for the visual arts and wanting to keep active mentally and socially were the most reported reasons for getting involved. F1 spoke about her loneliness following the death of her husband and subsequent move to the area whilst F5 spoke of being isolated from the intellectual networks which played a big part in her professional life. F3 and M1 talked about their involvement in terms of volunteering seeing their participation in the Look Group as helping develop skills or networks which benefit other areas of their public life.

Meeting structure and group management

This was the only group I observed who had continued to use the meeting structure suggested by Tate St Ives. At each meeting a facilitator would come prepared to talk on a pre-arranged topic and the other members would bring along images or biographical information to share in the discussion. I observed the co-ordinator (F3) take on this role for a discussion which contrasted the sculptors Anthony Caro and Anish Kapoor. After introducing her research, F3 called on each member in turn to talk about the images they had selected and brought to the meeting. There was only very little unprompted interaction or

questioning from the rest of the group with members seemingly happy to wait to be called upon before making their contributions. This formality continued when I began my questioning, with members needing an individual invitation to speak before putting forward their views and the conversation did not take flight. Following the meeting, the co-ordinator (F3) circulated a typed report of the meeting together with forthcoming meeting dates and discussion topics.

At the end of the meeting F3 confided in me that it was unlikely she would turn up to every meeting if she had not have taken on the role of co-ordinator. She seemed a little resentful that one member had requested to just attend meetings and not contribute through either facilitation or preparation. The importance of passive participation was strongly articulated by some participants to the Research and Networking Day – see Appendix 4.

Support from Tate St Ives and other organisations

On the night I attended, it was the penultimate meeting in the gallery venue. Financial considerations aside, the space was not ideal for the group. The room looked and felt like an artists' studio but without the creative paraphernalia and consequently felt quite stark and cold. The folding chairs were uncomfortable to sit on for very long and as people shifted around, the seats creaked loudly which was amplified by the poor acoustics.

Between F3 and M2, the group expressed a diversity of opinion about the support they received from Tate. F3, as a volunteer within the organisation, was proud of the association with Tate and viewed her involvement with the Look Group as an extension of her volunteer duties ensuring that the quality of

the discussion and the management structures were maintained appropriately. M2 by contrast appeared very cynical of Tate's community focus and even that the activity could be considered learning. Using the personal information I had revealed at the beginning of the meeting, he questioned whether Tate's involvement was in fact motivated by politics and economics.

I just wonder whether this is a learning group as opposed to a discussion group like a Book Group of which there are an awful lot round here. I am intrigued by the fact that this is a politics dissertation and not an art history one because this is part of a very big strategy it seems to me for large galleries like the Tate to get public money (M2)

Perceptions of Community and Sustainable Community

M3 was the only member present who had grown up in Cornwall and he talked about his experience living in St Ives at the heart of an artist colony.

it's really interesting to see the interaction between the art community in St Ives and the um...I mean there's the sort of general feeling that art was a bit naughty and bohemian and I used to feel a little bit freer I think associating with those friends whose parents were artists in a way or musicians. (M3)

The view that artists are a distinct group within the community in St Ives mirrors similar ideas across the Look Group discussions. The most telling word M3 used in his interpretation was the "um". It seemed that M3 was trying to search for the words to describe the majority or the remainder of the community that the artists were distinct from but he either could not place what the distinction was or find an acceptable way to express it.

The economic climate and its effects on the town had coloured the group's view on what a sustainable community might look or feel like. Unemployment

amongst young people and the recent cessation of a vital transport link to outlying, remote areas (October 2012) prompted M3's vision for sustainability:

Something where most people have jobs and young people don't have to move away in order to get reasonable work and some career prospects that would be my answer and if I had a magic wand I would plant a lovely shiny television factory in [name removed] where the helicopter thing is as well as of course having the helicopters back (...) I would like a TV factory and actually a top security prison would be fine because it would also produce a lot of employment. (M3)

F1 then continued the vision with a focus on housing:

And for all the workers at the television factory, for the prison warders we want affordable housing...(F1)

F2 received a resounding 'yes' in response to her idea:

And we want some really punitive tax put on the second homes. (F2)

At the end of the meeting F2, who had otherwise only contributed one or two thoughts to the discussion, came up to tell me that she had felt so strongly about the prevalence of second homes in the area that she had written to Prime Minister Gordon Brown. It was, she confided, the only time she had written to a politician but it was an issue she felt so strongly about in relation to her community that she had taken action.

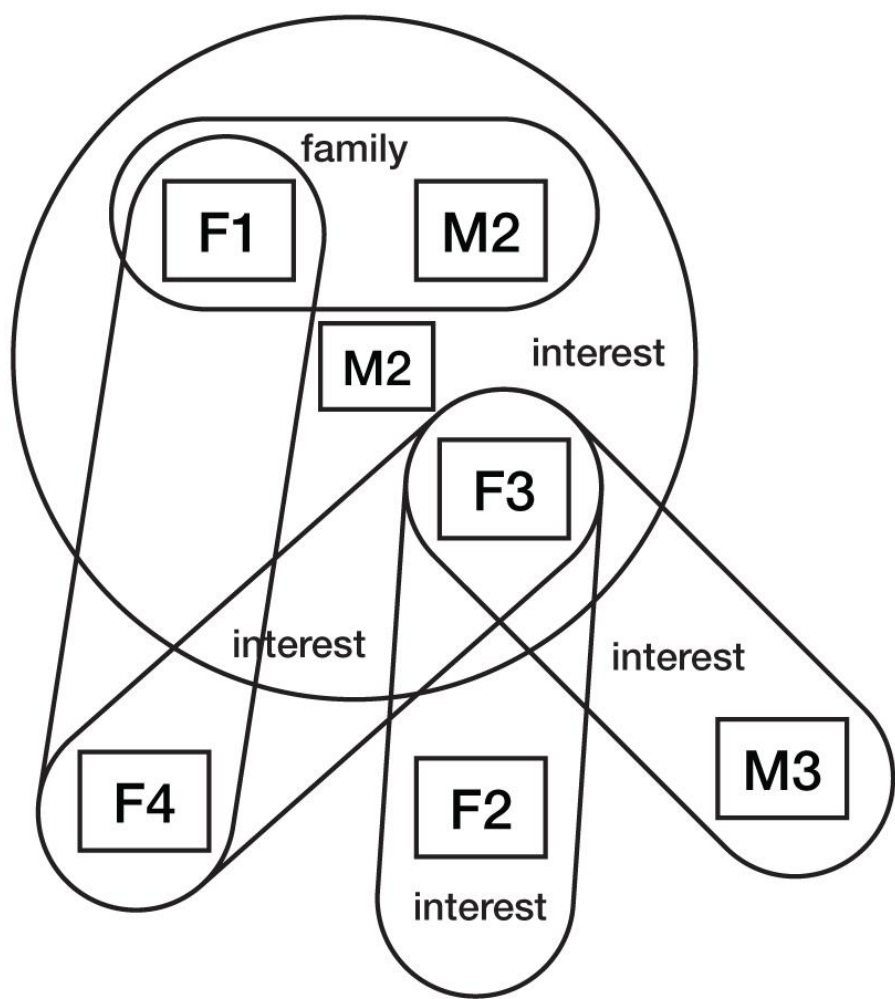
M2 had the final word, returning to his earlier scepticism about the role of galleries within the community he seemed to conclude that the role of the state in relation to the sustainable community was in the provision of employment:

But it's jobs and I think if you provide jobs then culture looks after itself and it's not the business of the state to splosh culture around and hope that it's going to achieve other objectives because it doesn't do that. (M2)

Look Group 5 Key Statistics

Members	10
Female	8
Male	3
Age range (from observation)	50-80
Number attending meeting	8

Figure 14: Look Group 5 Map of Relationships



Section 3 – Negotiated Feedback with the Look Groups

The third part of this chapter exploring the Look Group results reviews the data collected from re-visiting the groups and conducting semi-structured negotiated feedback sessions. Negotiated feedback meetings took place between November 2012 and June 2013.

Overall observations

- Every group had recruited new members
- Two groups were meeting in new venues
- More details emerged about members experiences of communities of place
- Many themes re-surfaced and were amplified within and across groups

Rationale

Negotiated feedback was integral to the research project for two main methodological reasons. Firstly feedback presented an important opportunity to give participants a voice in the research and to allow them to pose questions and deepen their understanding of the research project. My commitment to participatory research methods was firm but the logistics of reaching the groups, trying to establish a relationship of trust whilst causing minimum disruption to their learning activity and being mindful of Tate St Ives plans and intentions for the groups did not leave much space for the Look Groups to assume ownership of the research. Having visited the groups and heard their less than complimentary views on the Ning, their unanimous emphasis on the importance of face-to-face contact and with one group co-ordinator not even using e mail, inviting the Look Groups to take part in reflective activities online or via e mail

was unfeasible. Re-visiting the groups in person thus offered ways to amplify the voices of the Look Group members by creating a new data set alongside the field observations which had proved so useful in the first wave of data collection. The second strand of reasoning was to allow a further exploration of group sustainability. Re-visiting the groups at a later date allowed for a greater understanding of how issues such as recruiting new members and the support offered from Tate St Ives were continuing to influence the survival of the groups and to examine the changing economic and social context in which they were operating.

Process

As each negotiated feedback meeting included at least one respondent not present at the original visit and in recognition of the period elapsed between contact with the groups, some time was required at the beginning of the session to brief Look Group members on the aims and ambitions of the research project. Discussing a summary of the methods employed at the previous meeting and ensuring everyone had read (or re-read) and understood the ethical consent information was also essential.

The feedback was based on the group reports included in the first part of this chapter. From the discussion summaries, I selected groups of quotations which illustrated either a consensus or a range of contrasting opinions relating to the questions posed. The aim was for each group to reflect on their own respective data sets – thus Look Group 1 reviewed and commented on data collected from Look Group 1 only and not from the other four groups consulted. The quotations were provided in printed format and I guided the groups through the responses adding a sentence or two of context or commentary to ensure understanding.

Longer quotations were read aloud so that those present had sufficient time to read, listen and digest. I then asked the group to comment on the quotes and to add any additional thoughts. A recording was made of each session which was then transcribed for reporting and analysis.

The dynamic within the negotiated feedback sessions was different from my previous visits. With my initial contact with the group my approach was to pose very general and open ended questions and keep my talking time to an absolute minimum. The nature of reporting back results in the second visit required more talking on my part and I was conscious of allowing as much time as possible for group members to respond to the material collected and also to lead the discussions on to new topics. My impression was that my increased involvement in the meeting was offset by greater interaction between the members. Participants who had already met me appeared more relaxed, perhaps as a result of knowing what to expect, which helped them to talk with confidence and without the need for prompting previously required. And for new members, talking about their motivations for joining and experiences of being part of the wider community of place appeared to provide an ice-breaking opportunity which would not have been provided by the usual meeting structure. The group members also displayed great interest in my findings from the other groups and posed numerous questions about how their colleagues recruited members, the venues being used and the age and gender of members. There was also interest in how I was reporting my findings back to Tate St Ives with feedback ranging from a collective emphatic plea across all the groups to report the challenges of navigating a relationship with a large organisation to a strident

voice in one group that Tate's investment in the Look Group network should not be seen as contributing to community sustainability.

The presence of new or additional members presented a number of research challenges. There were the practical and ethical issues of establishing trust with the new respondents and ensuring informed consent was gathered – all within a matter of minutes due to the time constraints of conducting the research as part of their regular meeting. I was also aware that the methodology could be open to criticism since the same individuals were not consulted on both occasions. New members could influence the way in which previous respondents reflected on themes raised, for example. To demonstrate an awareness of this issue, Figure 15 has been included to compare how recruitment of new members between my visits impacted on the structure of the group.

These potential criticisms could be answered by making use of broad-brush arguments in favour of qualitative research which explores rather than explains phenomena and which thus does not require the creation of experimental conditions. This is also a participatory study about community and the flow of Look Group members in and out of the groups, and their involvement within the project is not only representative of the real conditions under which the groups operate but of the continually evolving nature of communities more generally.

Figure 15: Existing vs new members – shifts in membership between first visit and negotiated feedback

	Look Group 1	Look Group 2	Look Group 3	Look Group 4	Look Group 5
Total members attending negotiated feedback	8	6	6	7	7
Of whom:					
Members present at first meeting	2	1	4	4	4
Members absent at first meeting	2	2	0	2	0
Members recruited since first meeting	4	4	2	1	2

Presentation of results

The results from the negotiated feedback are presented as a cross-case report including selected quotations and observations. The findings are grouped around the major observations: each group had new members, the change in venues for some groups, the amplification of concerns around group diversity and the surfacing of new details pertaining to the communities of place local to each Look Group.

Recruitment of new members

As with my initial visits, word of mouth and introduction via existing social networks had been the most successful channels for bringing new members to the groups. Only one member from Look Group 2 had been directed by staff at Tate St Ives although she had also read about the group in the parish magazine describing the process as a “two-pronged attack”. The feelings of frustration at the lack of support from Tate in recruiting new members surfaced in other groups. Look Group 4 raised the issue of posters (previously debated by Look Group 3) with one member describing a personal role in the development of the materials:

we had an enormously long meeting asking people for their comments on how we should design a poster. And in the end it was one of those things, designed by committee – everybody wanted their say and to my mind it was an awful waste of time and money. (F5)

The same respondent reported lobbying Tate St Ives for the inclusion of information about the Look Group Network in the gallery’s regular “What’s on” guide adding that “if Tate’s not actually advertising it, what hope have we got?”. In Group 1 a member reported getting very lost on the Tate website trying to find the details for the Look Groups and eventually resorted to telephoning.

Changes in venue

Two of the groups – Group 1 and Group 5 were meeting in a new venue. Group 1 were alternating between their previous setting in the art gallery and a meeting room in one of the educational institutions. There were concerns that this was causing confusion for some members but regular communications from the Co-ordinator were helping to keep the group together. The move had arisen due to pressures on the gallery venue and one member described the anxiety over venue which the group had experienced as having “the sword of Damocles hanging over us”. (F10)

Group 5 had been preparing for their change in venue when I visited for the first time and although installed in their new venue and content making individual contributions towards the cost of the hotel restaurant space, the group were planning another relocation to a community space. This would, I was told, allow them greater privacy and comfort. The venue also hosted a range of other creative groups with whom members of Look Group 5 had connections and interests.

Whilst these were the major changes to venues, all the groups were in fact meeting in different spaces. Group 2 and 3 were in different classrooms within their educational settings and Group 4 had returned to the home of their co-ordinator.

Group diversity

The make-up of the group and in particular the lack of men and young people re-surfaced in the negotiated feedback sessions. It had been discussed by

Group 1 at my initial visit but I had not included any references to group diversity in the feedback quotations. Now without any male group members (one respondent described how they had “frightened off all the men”), there was some debate about how mixed the group really was. One respondent felt the mixture of ages represented in the group was a real strength:

What I like about this group is that we are all ages. We normally range from 24 to 81, which is very nice. Whereas if I go to U3A everyone is 50 to 90 and we're probably more in the upper ranges. And I prefer not to spend too much time with ancient geriatric people like myself. (...) I prefer a mixture of ages, it's much more natural, normal...(F5 LG1)

The use of the word “normal” was picked up by another respondent who felt that the mixture of ages in the Look Group was in fact unusual:

Normal is all these people the same age together. It's unusual to get a mix (F1 LG1)

Group 3 enthusiastically agreed that young people would bring very different perspectives to the discussion and that they would welcome this diversity of opinion however they questioned whether younger people would really be interested in taking part in this kind of activity:

Do you think that youngsters actually talk to one another? They are texting all the time. (F2 LG3)

Look Group 4 explored the idea that whilst retirement brought with it more time to devote to informal learning or volunteering, confidence and self esteem were also factors:

If you think about yourself at twenty-five and the confidence you have later... (F1 LG3)

The theme of gender imbalance in the Look Groups was also linked to community participation and sustainability:

You just get a real absence of men doing most of these things. In groups that I'm in there's very rarely any male influence (...) it breaks down the community (...) half the community aren't joining in and contributing. (F8 LG2)

The only group who seemed unbothered by the lack of diversity in their membership were Group 5. They had a good gender balance but had previously reported younger members only attending one or two meetings and who were then never seen again. One member put forward one interesting view relating to group diversity which linked to the idea of like-mindedness present across all the cases. He described the Look Group activity as "...pure fun (...) middle class fun". (M2 LG5)

I wondered whether the connection with social status might also be connected to Look Group 5's formal learning style reported in Section Two. The negotiated feedback gave the group an opportunity to reflect on this distinction and revealed that more structure had been introduced as the group developed to respond to demand:

When we started off it wasn't really structured (...) and it was most unsatisfactory. (F1 LG5)

Structure and formality avoids it becoming just a pub chat (M4 LG5).

New perspectives on the sustainable community

Previously Look Group 3 had talked about the remote rural communities in which members lived. During the negotiated feedback more details emerged about the relationship between the members and the central location in which meetings take place. One member talked about the town "dying" whilst others cited parking scarcity and cost as being reasons why they don't venture into the town. On a more positive note, one of the new members revealed a connection

with a young people's art group who had been responsible for creating murals in the town which the group were familiar with. F8 offered to make contact with the group and invite young people to come along to a Look Group and there was enthusiasm for this idea and for car sharing to exhibitions at Tate St Ives.

In Look Group 1 there was a positive discussion about inward migration to the town with members identifying a link between the location as a place of creativity and the presence of a higher proportion of younger people in engendering a welcoming environment for incomers.

There's a nice thing about [name removed] having such a strong student presence in that they seem very bright students to me and they talk to old people. You know they talk to you on buses or at bus stops or in bars or cafes and you can have proper conversations (F10)

Those present at the negotiated feedback in Look Group 3 were surprised at quotations from my previous visit suggesting that the area was not welcoming or accepting of people from outside the area relocating:

[Name removed]'s not really like that ...in my experience people have been very accepting. Maybe with [name removed] being a bit bigger (F9)

This reaction, from a new member, was accompanied by responses from the group which gave examples of community and cultural activity in which members took part in from dancing to live music but which had been very hard to access. The members explored the idea that the villages and parishes in the area had been and still were self-contained communities with strong identities of their own which contributed to their isolation and inaccessibility. One member gave the example of a Christmas Day sea swim which draws in a big crowd as being a more visible example of community:

It's not often but it really pulls you together. I love that feeling. (F7 LG2)

Look Group 4 members discussed whether, what they perceived to be, a strong voluntary sector in Cornwall was due to the high proportion of incomers looking for something to get involved with and being seen to make an effort in their new communities.

Reflections on the negotiated feedback process and results

The negotiated feedback sessions were a very worthwhile part of the research process. The re-surfacing of key themes like venues, group diversity and recruitment of members reinforced their significance for the qualitative and complexity analyses. The emergence of new details about the individual communities of place helped to build up a more detailed picture of the divergences and similarities between the different extremities of Cornwall: rural/urban; east/west and coastal/inland. The feedback visits also allowed me to further develop my relationship with each group through face-to-face contact and involve the members in planning the research and networking event.

Section 4: The Negative Cases: The Look Groups who stopped meeting

The data collection processes described in the previous sections documents the experiences of Look Groups in which the informal learning activity had been sustained over the three and a half years between the project inception and the completion of my fieldwork (November 2009 – July 2013). To understand the relevance and importance of the conditions which helped to sustain these groups it was necessary to also investigate at least one case in which sustainability had not been achieved. Two groups were identified through discussions with the Learning Team at Tate St Ives referred to here as Look Group 6 and 7.

Look Group 6

Look Group 6 had stopped meeting in 2011. Tate St Ives believed the “transient population” in the North Cornwall coastal resort to have been a contributory factor to its demise. Recruitment of members appeared to have relied more on advertising than word of mouth or existing social networks. With a high proportion of younger, male members the group were more active during the winter months when there were fewer activities on offer but when the weather improved, membership declined as alternative outdoor pursuits such as surfing took precedence. The seasonality of employment opportunities in a location dominated by tourism may also have been relevant. The group also experienced problems with their venue which appeared to be a contributing factor in their demise. The members appeared unaware of or unable to access a suitable alternative venue and requested support from Tate St Ives. Without

local knowledge of venues and other the specific group dynamics and interests Tate staff were unable to assist and the group eventually disbanded.

Look Group 7

This group began winding up their group activities just as I was making contact with the co-ordinator to arrange a visit in April 2012. The attraction of Look Group 7's location as a selection for one of the in-depth case studies was its mid Cornwall location but also its proximity to the Eden Project, one of my research partners.

I had been in contact with the co-ordinator between March and June 2012. In our initial e mail conversations, he revealed that the group had been meeting for the last two years usually with five or six members attending meetings from the eight-strong membership and that they all enjoyed their "lively" meetings. One sentence he wrote caught my eye as it echoed thoughts from one or two of the other groups about the nature of the activity they were engaged in:

I am not sure if this is informal learning. Most of the group knew each other before the group began.

The difficulty in interpreting e mail narrative is that I do not have the inflections of speech such as emphasis or pauses to know whether the difficulty in conceptualising a Look Group with informal learning is related to the second point he makes. The other Look Group members who revealed difficulty with the term "informal learning" seemed to point to learning being too formal a descriptor. "Fun" was suggested as an alternative by one member and "a discussion group" was favoured by another.

The group co-ordinator expressed a distance from Tate. In the first e mail he talks of “(having) nothing really to do with the Tate”. The geographical distance prevented the group from the regular visits they would have liked and the support given in terms of membership recruitment was minimal. “Besides putting up posters there is nothing we can really do to increase membership” he writes in the e mail correspondence. By the time of his voicemail message left in June 2012 the group had begun to wind up their activities and his feelings of separation from the gallery appear to have strengthened:

I think the main thing about it is that we were too far away, we were too small a group, we had no access to advertising or any other marketing support anyone could find so in a sense we didn't feel in any way connected to the Tate whatsoever really and with not having any new members or able to get any new members, it kind of dwindled.

The data informed me of the importance the co-ordinator placed on growing membership but did not really explain why they were seen as so crucial to the group's survival. In the data collected from the other groups, new members are seen as a source of novel knowledge or different viewpoints, a way of creating a bigger pool of people who might turn up to meetings or where subscriptions are being taken, a means of increasing the potential to cover the venue hire.

As I pieced together the correspondence and recording, I was troubled that the group's demise had taken place whilst I was undertaking my visits to the groups. At this point of the writing-up process I was also transcribing recordings and notes taken at the Look Group Research and Networking Day and had heard first-hand how my visits to the groups and the iterative process of feedback about their experiences had had an impact on the groups. They reported being more reflective of the activities they planned and valuing the connection, however tenuous, with Tate St Ives. Whilst under no illusions that I

was in any way the saviour of the Look Group Network, I began to wonder that had I been able to make the original visit to the group I might have been able to help them in some way.

Having written this rather piecemeal account of Look Group 7's experiences, I made another attempt to contact a member whom I knew had been active on the Ning. She agreed to an interview by phone through which I was able to build up a more detailed picture of the experiences of the group and the reasons why the group decided to close. The interviewee (F1 LG7) had joined the Look Group after reading an advertisement in the local press. The group started off in a community venue, moved to a Further Education College and ultimately began meeting in members' homes. F1 stated that the reason for the moving around was to make the meetings more "relaxed" but it appeared that as the group began to create conditions to suit the existing membership rather than the potential membership:

The very first one was the most mixed bag I suppose because that had been advertised widely and you weren't coming because you knew each other. I don't think I knew anyone at the first one. Which was nice actually because although I like doing things with my friends I wished it could have been that we'd stayed with this core of new people and they'd all brought more people and I'd brought more people and we'd had a more varied, bigger group of people we knew and didn't know.

As the group began to dwindle in numbers F1 worked hard to spread the word to her network of friends and despite some success the total group membership never exceeded seven, five of whom had know each other beforehand. The composition of the group had two major differences In comparison with the other groups which I had visited. One was the high proportion of male members:

There was quite a high proportion of men all the time which I think in my experience being, joining things and that is not typical. Sometimes I think they were the majority but there were always fifty percent.

The second difference was in the high proportion of artists in the group although this was not, as F1, explained, something that was discussed very openly, at least not at first:

... as time went on it was apparent and we didn't own up to this for a long time. (...) We didn't want to say that because it wasn't what the Look Group was...We didn't think the Look Group was about that. It was meant to be about people who enjoy talking about art. But it turned out that we were all artists.

The quote also reveals that the group were, despite the “very minimal” contact which both M1 and F1 describe with Tate St Ives, still conscious of a global Look Group identity that was about access for all.

The group had been experimental in the different approaches to organising the art discussions. F1 had suggested a book group approach of having two works of art to discuss whilst others had preferred a more formal and prepared presentation on a particular artist. There appeared to be a swing between the formality preferred by the “very keen” and “serious” existing members of the group who wanted an in-depth discussion and the informality that the group perceived would be attractive to potential members:

We then had a period when people were volunteering to do (presentations) and then we had a worry that it might be intimidating. We wanted to get more newcomers in and we did manage a couple of times and we didn't want them to think 'oh God I can't do that' so we thought we ought to keep it so that somebody didn't have that obligation to do a presentation.

Whilst the group were always keen to encourage new members, the move around different venues was about creating the best environment for the existing membership. The group moved from the IT room in the College, because it was too formal, to the Art room but then did not have the appropriate

equipment for presentations. In the end, a “relaxing” home environment became the most conducive to their discussions though F1 recognises the difficulty that choice presented in terms of recruitment:

But we always wanted other people to come in. And that was the problem when we moved into meeting up at our houses. But then when we weren't actually managing to get any new people by that point we just stopped worrying about it.

The demise of the group seemed to follow a trajectory beginning with the dwindling of numbers from that first group of strangers getting together. The group then becomes more homogenous as members are brought in using one main social network (F1) and becomes less accessible to potential members as advertising is difficult and the group are meeting in a private place. The unavailability of their group co-ordinator becomes the final contributing factor:

I think it was fading anyway and I think we'd gone as far as we could but the literal reason was when (M1) said he couldn't be our group leader for a while (...) and we all just said 'let's give it a rest for a bit'. But of course it's still resting. I think it had worn itself out. And we ended up with a group of seven, five of us were really just old acquaintances who'd known each other for years. So it lacked the spark.

M1 and F1 were some of the rare users of the Ning. F1 was even a fan, describing the site as “smashing” and highlighting the importance of feedback from other users in her learning:

Feedback from someone else is nice isn't it and somebody just making a comment on yours and that's what we lacked in our group. But I know you don't need a Ning to make a talking group work but it was a shame because it was a nice sideline.

F1 described her frustration with other members of LG7 who would not use the Ning because it was not “their thing”.

To complete the interview I asked F1 for her views on community and the sustainable community as posed to the group discussions. In response F1

began talking about groups and institutions that provide services for the community, giving the examples of male voice choirs, baby groups and a community-run café in the town which supports those on low incomes. Her view of sustainability was synonymous with self-sufficiency:

Communities if they are looking out, keeping things going as I've just described (...) then that sustains itself doesn't it? I can't think of any other way of describing it other than the environmental one.

On hearing the final part of the above comment I invited F1 to say more about the environmental aspects of the sustainable community. She had already referenced the Transitions Town movement with whom her son was active in a city and gave the impression of having too many different examples to give. She eventually talked about supporting local traders and sustaining the town economy:

Everybody just buys things on the internet or they drive to Truro and I will always try to get stuff from [location removed] and it's a last resort to do something else. So that's part of my sustainable community sense.

The conversation then drifted onto other topics and I was not able to pursue the line of questioning further. F1 did, however, send a footnote to the interview via e mail in the days following our conversation:

Did I make clear that 'sustainable' to me means environmental aspects of community living? So as well as supporting group activities in a social sense, also taking care not to damage our environment by pollution or waste of resources, etc.

F1's re-emphasis of the environmental dimension to community sustainability through her later correspondence appeared significant especially when placed in the context of the entire Look Group findings where she was one of only three respondents to talk about the natural environment.

Report Conclusion

The results presented here document the experiences of the members of the Look Groups. The in-depth individual cases of those groups who continued to meet, the negative case of the group which decided to close and the observations from the two 'all group' networking events build a picture of a passionately interested and articulate network of learning communities. The groups' make up had largely followed my earliest assumptions: members were predominantly white, well-educated women, over 50 years of age. But in each meeting or event there were surprises which challenged my view of the network as lacking diversity. There was the young woman in Group 1 who came to find alternative views to the curriculum and student perspective at the nearby university. And the man who had received no prior art education but followed contemporary artists like celebrities in the media and wanted to learn more. The woman in her eighties who travelled a significant distance to be part of one group quashed my foolish view that a group of over 50s would have interests and values in common. The rest of the group viewed her as they might their parents; with a mixture of respect and embarrassment illustrative of a generational difference. The real diversity in the groups, however, was unrelated to age and gender and was evident in the wide range of opinions which the art under discussion engendered. Through the art discussion the members were able to tackle topics which could have proven challenging for virtual strangers including party politics, feminism, religion, aesthetic and cultural tastes. There was also real diversity to be observed in the learning techniques employed by the groups. Most deviated from the learning model established by Tate and employed experimental and democratic approaches to

designing activities that would keep the majority of members happy, not be too onerous on a minority and retain the focus on looking and talking about visual art.

As well as the passion and enthusiasm which the group members used to describe their activities, my observations and transcriptions also record a collective sense of disappointment. This was a reflective group of people who recognised the individual and social value of their pursuits but whose potential had not and probably would not be realised through the relationship with Tate which they described. Whilst the host organisation was struggling with a lack of resources and a definitive strategy for how to grow and optimise the relationship with the network, the groups had grown restless, anxious and isolated. Rather than feeling intimidated by my presence, as the members of the Learning team had feared, the Look Groups took the opportunity to communicate the criticisms, fears and aspirations which they felt were either not being listened to or had not been invited through open communication channels. They also wanted to access my knowledge about the other groups and were positively surprised to hear how many were still meeting.

Appendix 4 – Evaluation Report of Look Group Research and Networking Day for the Catalyst Public Engagement Programme

What does a system look like? The Sustainable Community Research and Networking Day with Cornwall's Look Groups.

As a visual thinker, I spend a lot of time trying to think of ways to make my research quite literally visible to my publics. What could it look like? Will my research participants recognise it? And how on earth will I fit it all on one page? Support from the Catalyst Seed fund for public engagement, the European Social Fund and the College of Social Sciences and International Studies discretionary fund gave me the opportunity to try to explore some of these questions with members of Cornwall's Look Group Network – a series of adult informal learning groups - with whom I have been working over the last two years. I organised a day to bring everyone together to report on my research findings and listen to their experiences being part of the project. This is a short account of our day together.

My PhD research project has been investigating the idea of the sustainable community using a case study of the Look Group Network - a series of groups who meet to talk about art, artists, exhibitions and ideas. Established in 2009 by Tate St Ives in partnership with Cornwall Council, the aim of the project was to try to ensure that communities across Cornwall could have a relationship with the gallery and to develop skills in organising their own learning about visual art. Originally 22 groups were started using a grant from the Learning Transformation Fund which was administered by the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). Under Cornwall Council's direction, groups were brought together in each of the 19 Community Network Areas which were being established to drive the Council's Localism agenda plus additional groups in areas where there was particular demand. Now almost four years on and the network has managed to sustain 13 groups of learners across the county with only very minimal support and leadership from Tate St Ives. My interest in the network was in understanding whether these groups might in some way behave like communities, whether "community" was a label that they welcomed or resisted and if there were conditions created by the informal learning activity which helped to sustain that community.

My event, held at the University of Exeter's Penryn campus in July, had been designed to give participants plenty of time to reflect on the research findings but also importantly to meet and get to know other members of the network. Despite the name there is currently very little interaction between the different

groups but a lot of curiosity about how other communities select and organise their topics for discussion and their relationship with Tate St Ives. The process of visiting and re-visiting five of the Look Groups across Cornwall had given me lots of ideas of how to put together an event which I shared with [name removed], the Learning Curator for Adult Programmes at Tate St Ives and together we came up with a plan. [name removed] was keen to share news of some funding that would bring an expansion of the Look Group Network and to explore how the groups would respond to a making activity.

Getting down to business

The programme for the day began with a very short introduction to the Catalyst Project from [name removed], the academic lead for the programme which proved a really useful way to set the context for my participatory research project. It is easy to overlook how little people from outside of the academic community know about the work of a university and the research side of operations can be particularly mysterious. I then launched into an overview of my research project, a whistle-stop explanation of Complexity Theory with which I am analysing my data and then onto my main research findings.

I introduced the idea of a visual representation of the Look Group Network as a complex adaptive system with a couple of images :



As I explained to the groups, I had a brainwave that a slinky toy would help to explain my vision of a complex system. I rushed around to a friend's house to borrow her child's Toy Story dog – cue much hilarity trying to humanely remove head and back legs in the interests of social science! The problem however with a slinky is that it is too rigid and cannot therefore represent the constant change in a complex system.



In this image the flexible spiral represents a system comprising iterative cycles with one leading seamlessly on to the next with no obvious beginning or end. Unlike the slinky, the spiral can turn itself inside out - the centre, often represented as the place of power, is thus always changing and never fixed.

I presented my main research findings in four groups of themed quotes. I wanted to make sure the voices of the Look Group members could communicate the issues directly without too much of my interpretation. Judging by the immediate reactions from the audience – nodding, laughter, the knowing smiles - I knew I had characterised the discussions quite well. Some of the excerpts from the transcription were quite long however and I was concerned that not everyone was reading them at the same pace.

There were some really interesting questions from the floor: Had I made any comparative studies with different art discussion groups or other informal learning activity? What differences had I noticed between the groups I had visited? There was also the comment that the phrase “sustainable community” was “just awful” and not something that made them want to engage in discussion – which was useful to know! On the downside, a few people hadn’t been able to hear parts of the presentation due to poor acoustics and my punchy pace but as we moved to the group work in the seminar room upstairs we were able to slow things down a bit to give everyone a chance to ask and answer questions.

Small Group work, Feedback and Tate St Ives update

The group work revolved around four questions which had surfaced from the fieldwork data:

1. Look Group membership – what makes it work well. Participants in this group were asked to consider factors such as the ideal number for a discussion, the roles, behaviours and diversity of an ideal group.
2. Metaphors and similes – all the Look Groups I visited offered comparative ways to describe a Look Group with the most common description being “like a book group”. This inquiry group explored how accurate this comparison is and considered other metaphors and similes such as “Community” and “Big Society”.
3. Relationships – this group looked at different relationships that a Look Group might need to sustain it such as friendships, public sector relationships and cultural networks.
4. Resources – a discussion about the kinds of resources a Look Group needs such as venue, learning materials and technology.

I facilitated the relationships inquiry group. One of my group, an artist, was very curious about the language I had used, asking me doggedly “What do you mean by relationships?” and “what do you mean by public sector?” I realised that I had perhaps assumed too much prior knowledge of my sphere of work or had been relying on language that whilst very prevalent in public organisations, is not used in the outside world. It was a good wake-up call and after apologising for my lack of clarity, and encouraging the other group members to

try to help me explain myself, we settled down to a productive conversation about relationships. The group abandoned my suggestions for types of relationship and instead promoted the importance of respectful, open and democratic relationships.

After listening to interesting feedback from all the groups I invited Georgina to talk about the new developments with the Look Group Network. Tate St Ives has recently been successful in its application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a grant towards the building of new gallery and learning spaces. The grant will also fund a new part-time post to support the growth of the Look Group Network and the development of learning and interpretation materials by Look Groups for display alongside exhibitions of the St Ives Modernists.

Making Activity

Lunch gave everyone a chance to circulate and socialise with new people. It was also the opportunity for [name removed] and [name removed], a freelance artist educator and the original Look Group Project Manager, to set up their art activity for the afternoon session.

I knew that the Tate learning team would be able to adapt to any learning environment given the very challenging nature of the building they currently work in, so I wasn't surprised when our seminar room was swiftly transformed into a studio space. We were going to be modelling using air drying clay so when we returned from lunch [names removed] had lined the desks with plastic sheeting and were handing out disposable aprons and baby wipes to protect clothes and clean up any finger print evidence of our activity. I think it is safe to say that people were a little nervous about getting involved. Many had spoken to me about how they had chosen to join a Look Group because it was about talking about and not making art. Others had confided how they couldn't even draw a straight line but felt they were able to take part in art discussions on the same footing as the artists in their group because of the emphasis on looking and expressing their views in a supportive environment.

Our first task was an individual activity: to model a member of a Look Group in a figurative, representational or abstract way using the clay. For a moment or two silence fell as everyone began first thinking and then modelling but this was followed quickly by snorts of self mocking laughter as works of art were revealed. Knowing my limits, I had created a slice of cake to represent the very warm welcome I was given by one Look Group co-ordinator on a snowy night in March. I saw a kettle had been modelled elsewhere with similar significance and a bunch of flowers but most people had made their fellow Look Group members. We were then invited to get together with members of our Look Group (or get adopted by one) and talk about our models and find some way to make them one. And finally we brought all the models together to create the

Look Group. As the different models became one rather incoherent, melting muddle, the conversations between the sculptors became energetic. With very little intervention from our facilitator, the Look Group members moved the discussions from admiring each other's pieces, through basic logistics ("shall we link this here?") to a shared vision of a connected network. The individual pieces were no longer the focus but the relationships between them. Just as I had observed in Look Group meetings, the members were using a piece of art as a means to negotiate and express relationships and demonstrating how effective it can be at keeping a conversation going. It was also really pleasing to hear that the members were reflecting on the discussions from earlier in the day and recognising the need for change and growth in the network. One member asked in an almost rallying cry: "Are we ready for this? Do we have the energy to keep this going and growing?" My answer based on their demonstrable enthusiasm, their understandings of the nuances and intricacies of a multi-layered community and public sector partnership project and their wealth of practical ideas is a very confident – "yes".



The Sustainable Community Research and Networking Day was held on Friday 19th July in the Exchange Lecture Theatre and Yellow Seminar Room in the Exchange Building at Penryn Campus.

Thanks to Kerri Popperwell, Marketing Communications Officer for assistance in the planning and on the day.

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